

WORLD•WATCH

VISION FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

NOTE FROM A WORLDWATCHER

Passing the Torch

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Passing the Torch

When I was 50, I ran a 146-mile footrace across Death Valley, from the lowest point in the contiguous United States (Badwater, 280 feet below sea level) to the highest (the peak of Mt. Whitney, 14,491 feet). The temperature for the 100 miles across Death Valley hovered around 125 degrees, and by the time I reached the official finish line at the upper terminus of the Mt. Whitney auto road, at around 8,000 feet, I was beyond exhaustion. But the runner's code in this race is that you don't stop at the official finish line, which is where it is because the National Forest Service won't allow competitions on the trail to the peak. So, finish line or not, you keep on running until you reach the peak. My last two miles up the wind-swept rocks were positively exhilarating.

Now, in my 60s, I'm still running those "ultramarathon" races, still enduring the long hours of dehydration, depletion, and meditation—and still feeling the thrill of finishing strong.

And so it will be with my work at *World Watch*. I'm not about to quit, but I'm quite ready to finish. This issue is my last.

A few months ago, my wife and I went to visit my younger brother and his wife in Southern California. We first flew into the San Francisco Bay area to visit friends, then rented a car and drove down the coast to Los Angeles. On the few occasions when I've ever had to rent a car, I've always asked for the smallest one they have. This time, I was given a Chevrolet. It was the first General Motors car I'd driven since writing my book *What's Good for GM*, 35 years ago, and I felt uncomfortable even getting into it. The role of cars in climate change wasn't on the horizon in 1969, but the signs that cars were dominating our lives in worrisome ways were all around us. In my book, I had written about the emerging problems of car-dominated cities, a car- and oil-dominated economy, and car-inflicted isolation. It was a time when highway builders were bulldozing their way through cities with impunity. Neighborhoods were being cut off from each other, and car drivers cut off from their environment. In the decades since, that kind of isolation has spread from cars to the whole built environment—both physical and electronic. Increasingly, we spend our lives in vehicles and buildings with artificial light, climate control, and sound-proofing. Even cognitively, more and more of our experience is the artifice of TV or movie fiction, video-game conflict, or the contrived dreams and deceptions of

advertising. Nature continues to recede, and the problems I described half a lifetime ago have only continued to worsen.

Having ordered the cheapest car available, Sharon and I expected crank windows and a good Pacific Ocean breeze in our faces. What a surprise to find ourselves in a plush interior that in 1969 would have passed for extreme luxury—and to be greeted by a woman's voice emanating softly from a Global Positioning System (GPS) device on the dash. We were being accompanied, it seemed, by a female version of Hal, the futuristic computer in the movie *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Yes, I remember when the year 2001 was far in the future!

We tried a little interaction with the GPS, and it was startling. "She" spoke to us with unerring accuracy: "*Approaching freeway exit on the right—keep to the left, followed by an immediate keep-to-the-right.*" I moved left, and heard a "*ding*" as the right-hand exit passed, then as the road divided again, heard "*keep to the right.*"

I felt as if I were in the movie *The Truman Show*, with someone watching me through a screen in the sky, and directing each move I made. It passed through my mind that the technology now exists for the government to know where I am continuously; if GPS can sit on my dashboard, why not under my skin? (And indeed, as I write, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has just approved a medical chip implant that could eventually be placed in every human, allowing everyone's whereabouts to be known at all times). Maybe the paranoiacs who think the FBI has planted listening devices in their skulls aren't as wacky as I thought!

More unsettling than the sense of being watched, however, was the realization that as we became accustomed to the rhythms and vocabulary (and utterly unflappable tone) of the GPS voice, we were becoming more dependent on it—or her. We found ourselves putting the paper map aside, and simply listening to softly enunciated instructions. I paid less attention to signs, and to the surrounding environment, and more to the neat mesh of a "*ding*" and a turn of the wheel. "She" (as we began referring to the lulling voice in our dashboard) could have said "*approaching sharp right turn*" as I drove along a cliff with the ocean at my right, and if there had been a "*ding*" I fear I might have reflexively turned the wheel and flown off the precipice into the sea. Isn't that more or less what America did after being mesmerized by George W. Bush's TV ads?

In a general way, I think that's about where the "free

world” is today—obliviously heading for its final splash. It’s not that the majority of people are consciously suicidal, but only that they have been lulled by messages repeated so often that they aren’t questioned. “Live in a bigger house. Buy more stuff. Fear terrorism. Kill terrorists.” The GPS in my car was simply the latest manifestation of the transformation that has taken humans from the state of alertness we evolved in for millions of years into a state where our natural sensory capacities—those that gave rise to our unique adaptability and intelligence in the first place—are atrophying.

The pioneer ecologist Paul Shepard tells us that early humans acquired a vast knowledge of climate, ecology, flora, and the habits of predators and prey wherever they lived. But that knowledge is now nearly gone, and we depend instead on our technologies. We have thrown away our maps. And the people we have allowed to lead us—programmed by Halliburton, Exxon, the Heritage Foundation, and the Christian Right—have no more independent thought of their own than the digital voice in my Chevrolet GPS.

As my wife and I drove south, we mused that the day will come when a GPS will announce to a vacationing family that they are approaching the Grand Canyon. Scenes of the canyon will appear on a high-definition screen in the car. The kids will watch the screen in a stupor. No one will think to look out of the window.

We were driving toward Southern California in preparation for what for us will be a momentous move. In recent years, many of our friends have left places like the Washington, D.C. metro area and headed for Washington State, Colorado, or Vermont. Sharon and I, too, want to leave behind the urban sprawl—but unlike many of our kindred souls we’re heading for the hills in the scrub country of northern Los Angeles County. From Virginia, with its lush forests and abundant water, we’re going to a place where it’s hot, arid, and just a few miles from the notorious San Andreas fault. Here, we’re going to build a small house. In the evening, we’ll sit out by the chaparral and watch the horizon for light in the gathering darkness—whether from the sunset, the soft glow of distant Los Angeles, or the more ominous glow of approaching forest fire.

The thing is, we’re not afraid of natural catastrophe. If the Earth sees fit to have periodic upheavals and conflagrations, who are we to second-guess it? We have such events in our own guts, and can’t always explain them. But what we are afraid of is what will happen to our humanity if we live any longer in the shadow of Washington, D.C. We have to get out, now.

Worldwatch Institute, which publishes this magazine, has its offices in Washington because its mission is to help inform our leaders and change their policies. I’ve come to realize that when you are young, there can be great satisfaction in envisioning a better future for humanity, and sharing that vision with others. A basic reason for that satisfaction, I think, is that the vision is a powerful surrogate for the actual world it evokes. When the horizon of your life’s journey seems far away, that vision can be enough to keep you

going. It’s the journey, not the destination, that matters—so says the cliché.

But what I now find, at least for myself, is that the vision is not any longer sustaining. It’s no longer enough to “talk the talk.” If ever I’m going to walk the walk (or run the run!)—to really cut down on the cars and consumption and get back on my feet not just for sport but for life—it has to be now while I’m still young enough to cut brush and carry rocks. Writing about what I envision is no longer a surrogate for seeing with my own eyes.

It’s not only that my horizon is growing closer, though. It’s also that the evolution of my thinking has in some ways departed from the course that is considered politically correct in the “sustainable future” community. While progressive people take particular pride in their ability to think independently, there is one taboo that is as binding for free thinkers as it is for those—like George Bush—who simply believe, and don’t bother with thinking. That all-binding taboo is the idea that civilization is dying. It’s a thought that is absolutely unacceptable to politicians left and right, and equally unacceptable to organizations like Worldwatch.

There are many who believe the approaching end of the oil economy will trigger the industrial and economic renaissance that civilization needs in order to be transformed into a higher state that is not dominated by obsession with war, poverty, and unrest. I hope that’s true, but I also doubt that it’s that simple. No one has yet found any satisfactory solution to the problem of hubris, and I have a sneaky suspicion that the problems we brought on ourselves with oil-powered machines will soon be replaced by the equally dangerous problems of genetic engineering, nuclear weaponry, human crowding, and—perhaps worst of all—the political and commercial control of what people think they think.

All of this is, in a sense, a parting of ways with the Worldwatch mission. It marks me as a “pessimist” when the only acceptable attitude for anyone in any high-level job anywhere today is to be an “optimist.” But *am* I a pessimist? To answer that, I like to borrow the perspective of a humble creature that is one of the favorite subjects of Edward O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist who has contributed perhaps more than anyone else to our understanding of just how rapidly the world’s species are departing this Earth. Imagine that I am an ant, nearing the completion of a magnificent ant-hill. Along comes a 12-year-old boy with big sneakers, who gives the hill an aggressive karate kick—completely destroying it, as men *routinely* destroy whatever blocks their way in the videos he watches—and, having destroyed it, just keeps on walking. What do I, the ant, do? I pick up a grain of sand, carry it to where my instinct tells me is the best place to begin rebuilding, and lay it in place.

Like an ant, I just keep on moving, good news or bad. I’m a participant in the human race, and in that race you don’t quit easily—perhaps *especially* when you are heading for the finish.

—Ed Ayres