

From the Garden: Toward Refineries of Dream

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As we gathered up boxes of tomatoes—the latest harvest from our demonstration garden in Walnut Creek—to give the local food bank, I reflected on an oscillation which Progress was supposed to have smoothed out of human history long ago.

Like many counties, Contra Costa now suffers from insufficient funding. The UC County Extension Office in which I volunteer as a recently certified Master Gardener hangs by a thread of donations. This very garden, reported on weekly by Joan Morris, lives because of the Contra Costa Times (in whose back yard it grows) and the local businesses who have provided it with fencing, irrigation, and volunteer presenters on Friday mornings.

As our county's farm advisors, nutritionists, teachers, fire fighters, administrators, and police compete for what money remains, a flow of income so gigantic that its numbers almost transcend imagining pours through a portal overshadowing the Carquinez Strait. And that flow is oscillating upward.

According to advocacy and research group Environment California, gasoline sales in California alone are rising \$1.1 billion dollars annually. Between 2003 and 2007, the seven largest oil companies in California—BP, Chevron, Conoco Phillips, Exxon Mobil, Valero, Royal Dutch Shell, and Tesoro—scooped in a mean 120% increase in annual profit amounting to \$131.8 billion by 2007. \$19.1 billion of it went to Exxon Mobil, which runs a refinery in Torrance. (Some perspective: A billion \$1 bills stacked end to end would reach around the Earth three and a half times. A billion in stacked silver dollars would reach from Salt Lake City to Detroit. The war in Iraq would spend it in two days.)

The crest of the flow surged into what *Fortune* identified in 2009 as the world's largest corporation: Royal Dutch Shell, whose refinery looms over the hills and roads of nearby Martinez. This Netherlands-based multinational commanded a profit increase of \$19.6 billion. A still greater surge poured into Texas-based Tesoro, whose profits rose 654% between 2003 and 2007. They too refine oil in our county, as does Valero, whose surge in profit climbed 466% during the same period.

Critics of multinational finance are apt to dwell on the money being sucked from languishing communities or on dismal safety and ethics records, which in the case of Shell include penalties for false advertising, groundwater pollution, hazardous waste, crude spilled into San Francisco Bay, and carbon monoxide venting. The critics would also point out that what companies like Shell spend on the places they inhabit is minuscule compared to the profits they funnel away. In some cases multinationals fund brutal local oppression, as in Nigeria, whose military has been known to execute environmental activists.

What fascinates me, however, is what might be called the psychology of the oscillation. I'm interested in how we explain to ourselves the obvious fact of entire lifetimes spent treading rough financial water (if not drowning in debt through illness, unemployment, or foreclosure) in the very midst of fabulous flows of wealth. Why do we suppose it has to be this way?

Explanations by locals vary across the emotional spectrum, from defensive-sounding justification (successful capitalists have a right to their money, some of which magically trickles down to the parched masses) to persecution (corporations are destroying the world). Occasionally I'm told that

oscillations are part of the divine plan, or the Universe's, or karma. Fatalists shrug. The secretly enraged but outwardly cheerful avoid “negativity” by not thinking about it. Employees of giant global firms struggle with helplessness and guilt. Well-meaning psychotherapists shrink it all down to personal “issues” and family stresses. Meanwhile, families, economies, and ecologies decline together.

I pull weeds for composting—always best to catch them before they go to seed—and consider the nature of oscillation.

A gardener rather than a revolutionary, I look with wariness upon schemes to forcibly adjust the status quo. Every gardener knows, or should, that growth can't be forced. Nor do I argue about who deserves what money—although I worry about how the unregulated chemicals it buys wreak havoc with minds and bodies. The research evidence on this is large, unequivocal, and terrifying.

“What do you think about all this?” I ask the soil, putting the question under my breath. On the breeze I fancy a calm, silent reply: *What disrupts the balance never lasts*. I nod and yank another weed. Push a natural system far enough, and eventually comes the counter-reaction as the system readjusts itself.

The ancient Greeks mythologized this natural force as Nemesis, restorer of balances. At the height of Rome's pride in itself, three of its best legions fell in the forests of Germania, halting the Empire's expansion there and giving sleepless Augustus nightmares. Get charged enough for gas, get sick enough of pollution, waste, and weeping polar icecaps, and people begin to look at walking, biking, trains, and carpools in a new light. In this kind of “activism,” citizens can vote with their feet.

An advantage of culture is that it allows us to imagine and choose among the necessary adjustments. What kind of life would we like for ourselves? What kind of community would we *enjoy* building and participating in? One without fears about poisons or toxins? One in which we retain the power to determine our own future?

What we need, I sometimes think as I put away my shovel, is a local refinery that purifies collective dreams: dreams not about how things are, but about how they could be.