

Apocalyptic Soiree

For more than 30 years, I have struggled with the immortal lines of Oscar Wilde who wrote: *“Yet each man kills the thing he loves, by each let this be heard”*. I have always understood its sentiment and context but believed it to be too devastating an indictment of humanity, especially when one looks at the overwhelming capacity for human beings to act with kindness and their ability to create some of the most amazing marvels possible. Sadly, following my recent trip to California, I am on the verge of conceding the point to Wilde.

Since I married a Californian girl almost 20 years ago, we have travelled back to that wonderful state almost every year. For personal reasons, we were unable to visit California for 3 years, and in May, we returned for a month with the possibility of buying a house and moving back permanently. What we saw is almost impossible to articulate. In a nutshell, it was like meeting someone that you haven't seen in years and seeing that they were terminally ill. The only way to describe the landscape was sick and dying. Indeed, it looked incurable. What is even more tragic, is that like many illnesses, much of this devastation could have been prevented. We had the symptoms years ago and ignored them, now I can say with certainty that the illness has manifested and the only thing we can hope to do is to try and stem its spread.

Some of the scenes we witnessed looked like they were straight out of a 'Mad Max' movie or 'The Road'. Driving east from San Francisco towards the Sierra Nevada mountains, there was almost nothing green for approximately 130 miles. It was only when we first hit Sonora that things began to liven up again. On the way, we saw a tent city by the highway outside the town of Modesto, juxtaposed against massive warehouses being built as distribution hubs for the likes of Amazon. On a different trip, we drove to our favourite hot springs, which took us through Napa Valley. Again, all we could see for miles and miles were the black hills where pine trees once stood. Back in 2020, there were fires that burned some 6,250 square miles of land in California but seeing some of its consequences on the scarred land, was heart breaking. Our beautiful hot springs, which were once surrounded by pine trees and other wildlife, was replaced by what now looks like some post-apocalyptic community. There were no permanent structures, just trailers and prefabricated shelters, barely any trees and little to no wildlife. When we got back, we went to visit my brother-in-law, who showed me where the fires were stopped in the canyon in which he lives. He is only a little bit outside San Francisco, and to be honest, only for the change in wind, his house and life's work could have been scorched off the earth in minutes.

Having experienced this first-hand, all my wife and I could do was stare at the changes and wonder if everybody else was seeing what we were seeing. Oddly, it felt like we were looking at two different worlds. People were going about their daily business, many as happy as can be and we were left asking “How can they not see it? How are they not freaked out by all of this?” It was then, that my witchy wife suggested that maybe it is like the frog in boiling water syndrome. As many will know, there is a theory out there, that if you put a frog in a pot of cold water and slowly heat it, the frog will not jump out. By the time it realises that the water is too hot, the opportunity to escape has already passed. Maybe the people who have been living on the fringe of a warmer climate don't yet feel it? Maybe they are like the frog, slowly getting boiled, yet think there is nothing wrong? I don't know exactly what it is that is holding people back, but one thing that my wife and I knew for certain, was that we could not live there. The idea of moving to a place where

you need to worry about water, wild-fires and even power outages, was not an attractive prospect.

Due to the nature of my wife's work, she spends a lot of time out in the wild foraging for plants and herbs. Even in those more remote areas where she has sought nature's bounty, there was little reward. The land is so stressed, that for her, it would be immoral to even take anything from it at this stage. Indeed, we know of several people who could now be considered climate refugees. In the community of friends that my wife has, there are stories of chefs, crafters and herbalists who are now leaving California because the wild plants on which they rely are no longer available or, those that are, are in such short supply, that they could not justify taking them from the land.

There was some peculiar disconnect looking around and seeing everybody happy and having a good time. People were out having fun in the bars, restaurants were busy, people were shopping and genuinely felt like they didn't have a care in the world. Maybe happy is the wrong choice of words, maybe 'distracted' would be more appropriate? When we talked about it later, my wife and I remembered 'The Masque of the Red Death', which we saw with Vivienne and Andreas. Could it be that capitalism is the Prince Prospero who has invited all of those with money into his palace for a great banquet in the hope that all will be distracted and safe from what is happening outside? After all, Prince Prospero's guests have the means and resources to stay cool, to keep their lawns green and to endure the incredible heat waves in comfort. Those outside the palace, those of lesser means, are left to fend for themselves. The point being that, while they enjoyed their apocalyptic soiree in luxury, they too, ultimately, could not hold back the disaster. Rich or poor, there is no escape. The plague is here, and I do not mean Covid. I mean the blistering of our Earth from over-heating. All I ask is that somehow people wake up from the drunken stupor of distraction and see the reality of what is happening. At least this way, we might best be able to prepare for the road ahead and mitigate as much hardship as possible. There is little point in talking about climate change, it has already changed. Now, it is about managing it, so that the world does not end up looking like California.

In the meantime, while the West coast of America burns, and we witness unprecedented flooding around the world, Bezos and Branson fly into space for their own personal satisfaction and material gain. I understand that 'Blue Origin' has already sold \$100 million in tickets for people wanting to fly into space for a couple of minutes. This news has left me even more confused and frustrated. When I look at the innovation that is required to achieve what these men have, I am convinced that we can find solutions, that we are not destined to "*kill the things we love*", and at the same time, I wonder why they would not turn their remarkable talent and resources into solving more urgent problems? Is there such a thing as stupid genius? Or was Goldsmith correct when he wrote "*where wealth accumulates, men decay?*"

In any event, when I look at the soaring corporate profits, the unparalleled personal wealth of the super-rich, those people living in tents outside Modesto California, the burning heat on one side of the planet and floods on the other, it is not difficult to conclude that the current economic system has failed. While I do not think that we have the time to develop and cultivate a new economic model, I firmly believe that difficult personal decisions will need to be made.

Ultimately, until we can innovate our way out of this problem, the choice is between sacrificing our lifestyles or life on Earth.

Feergus