

NOT Sarah Palin's Alaska (continued)

gracefulness to it.

I have studied the photographs that I took here many times. Because, when I saw this pipeline running eerily beneath these brooding mountains, I felt a current of relief within me. Which I found both interesting and disconcerting.

Disconcerting because feeling relief, especially at the sight of this particular pipeline, was incompatible with my consciously held beliefs. In psychological lore, this is known as cognitive dissonance. While at the time I wasn't in a state of alarm about global warming – that came later - I had been concerned about it since studying the subject in 1994. The Trans-Alaska pipeline was a vital artery in the very system of fossil fuel production that I knew was destabilizing the planet's climate.

Interesting because never before had the simple presence of a human structure in a wild setting felt emotionally reassuring to me. My previous experiences had all run in the opposite direction. For almost 35 years I had treasured the way wild places engender solitude, yet these very places, all in the Lower 48, were unrelentingly threatened with desecration or destruction by the escalating cycle of human economic activity and overpopulation. That had always been my frame of reference. Put another way, all these wild places in the Lower 48, even when they were huge, had been encompassed by some boundary I was able to sense, perhaps unconsciously. Up here, by contrast, I was enveloped in wild areas so enormous that they obliterated any perception of that kind. When that happened I began to yearn for hints of a human presence.

I have realized that the way I reacted to the pipeline's being there was a symptom, a trace, of alienation from the wildness of the land. As Carl Jung once said, people can get dirty from too much civilization. Even when we don't want to be, I'd just discovered. Jung added, however, that whenever we touch nature we get clean. As much as I loved being in Alaska, I think I'd need to be immersed in it for awhile longer, maybe for a year, to give those endless expanses the time they need to cleanse that trace.

Speaking of alienation, consider the following quotation from an editorial, "The Desolate Wilderness," that *The Wall Street Journal* has printed every Thanksgiving since 1961. It's from a 17th century Pilgrim account describing their arrival in Massachusetts Bay in 1620:

"Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wilde beasts and wilde men? and what multitudes of them were, they then knew not: for which way soever they turned their eyes (save upward to Heaven) they could have but little solace or content in respect of any outward object; for summer being ended, all things stand in appearance with a weather-beaten face, and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hew."

Granted that the Pilgrims encountered delays and other mishaps that threw them in the path of a harsh, protracted winter they hadn't prepared for, and that a lot of their people died as a result. Nevertheless, such a belligerent reaction to both the landscape of North America and the indigenous people who were living there was an asteroid-sized symptom of alienation, an indication of how completely the culture they came from had lost any bond with wildness, and the destructive potential it unknowingly harbored in consequence. While the Pilgrims' looking skyward may have brought them spiritual solace, religion in that sense isn't a substitute for the capacity to look with care beneath one's feet and find splendor there.

At least a century before the Industrial Revolution the desolate mindset that fostered genocide against Native Americans and is now undermining the stability of our climate was already ingrained.

In Alaska a good cup of coffee seems to be fundamental. Thus we encountered the plentiful Espresso coffee stands of southern Alaska once we got down to Glennallen, still over 200 miles out from Anchorage. The first of the series was a tiny stand along the highway with nothing else in sight except open ground and spruce trees. As though it were perched on an iceberg.

We pulled in as much out of curiosity as for a fine cup of joe. Beneath the ample "Espresso" sign the rectangular wooden hutch was twelve feet long, just wide enough for a door on the back, and seven feet high. Painted on the customers' side beneath the service window on a broad, white background, in flowing detail, were six Fireweeds: tall, pink-flowering plants with long, green-leaved stems. Being pollinated by two swallowtail butterflies.

It was a good cup of joe.

We found numerous Espresso stands as we got closer to Anchorage, some adorned with painted Fireweeds in different styles, one with a purple moose.

Summing up, when you come to Alaska expect the quirky and the weird, as well as a passionate experience of wildness. And because being there deeply penetrates the unconscious, expect insights as well.



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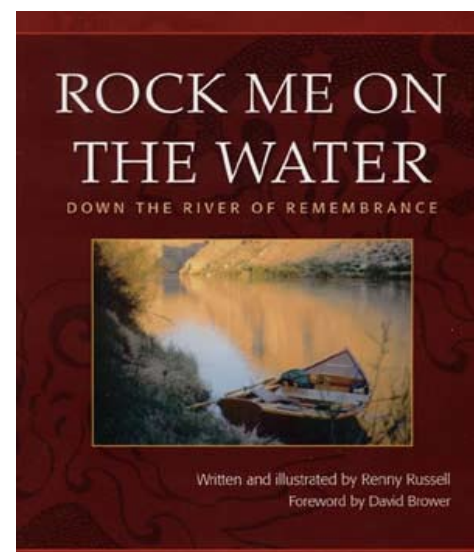


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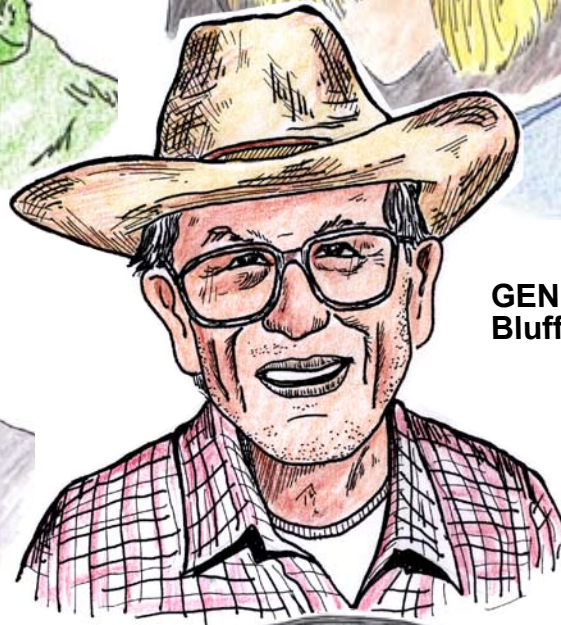
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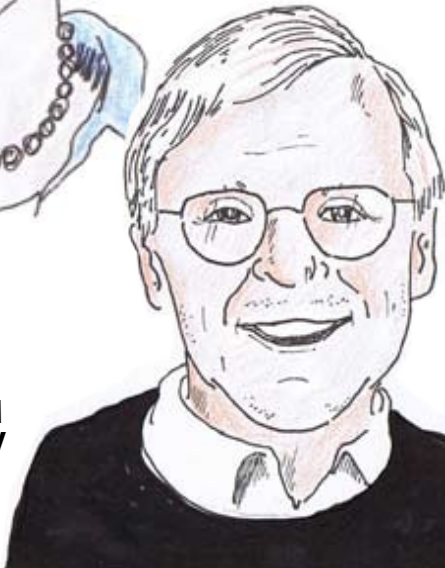


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Top 10 Ways to Reduce Political Polarization in Congress (They act like children, so they get treated like children.)

10. Legislators who trash-talk the other party get a time out and lose a gold star (see item 8)
9. Allocate congressional pay based solely on gold stars (see item 8)
8. Sergeants at arms will award gold stars for courtesy and decorum in both house and senate (see item 3)
7. Republicans who stonewall must spend a week listening to Rachael Ray
6. Democrats who stonewall must spend a week listening to Sean Hannity
5. <email your favorite idea to the Zephyr here>
4. Eliminate the "aisle" by mandating alternate seating
3. The president will appoint a random 3rd grader as sergeant at arms for each house
2. Filibusters will be outlawed and replaced by food fights
1. Teach common courtesy by streaming Sesame Street 24x7 to both chambers

Oh yeah, and for god's sake, eliminate the damned electoral college!