



OF TERROR

The choice between fear and the Golden Rule

By Robert Leo Heilman

It was not really surprising but still disappointing to hear that I'd been called an "eco-terrorist" by one of my fellow Umpquans. The news was secondhand, of course, which somehow made it worse. Whoever pronounced the judgment, whether she or he, hadn't bothered to tell me about it, but let it slip, offhand, as if it were a well-known fact.

"Him? He's an eco-terrorist," as though there was nothing more that need be said, as though I had it printed on my business card, "Bob Heilman, Eco-terrorist."

I did what people usually do when confronted with something odd and shadowy and disturbing. I feigned indifference, laughed, and pretended that it amused me. After all, what else can you do in such a situation? It was merely an anonymous slander, not meant for my ears anyway, and committed by someone whose life is probably a good deal sadder and more wretched than my own.

Still, I resented the accusation. I began foolishly marshaling my arguments, standing before an imaginary judge and jury, reviewing twenty years worth of statements, public and private, to see if there was anything I'd ever said or done that would lead a reasonable person to conclude that I am a menace to my neighbors.

At first, I focused on the first half of the odd compound word, *eco*, as in ecology. Yes, I'd spoken and written about environmental matters. I can't help it, having lived in Douglas County, Oregon, during a time of harsh words and desperate acts revolving around what are known as "forest management practices."

Generally I've come down on the side of the soil, water, sunlight, and air. But, I've always been of two or three minds on this and nearly every other matter. Conflict, I believe, is unavoidable in our free society; compromise is essential to preserving it. Complexity is what I find wherever I look, whether at the natural systems that provide us with life or the culture and politics with which we deal with nature and each other. That's a natural approach for me, a character trait that led me to writing and one that has been reinforced by the craft itself, with its necessary habits of carefully observing and then describing what I see.

Terror, then, the root of the second half of the compound, may explain this unexpected casual slander. Although I have always opposed extremism and its violent expression, terrorism, someone is afraid of me, frightened enough to denounce me as a terrorist. Why me? Why anybody? I cannot say, except that it is human nature to try to put a face to your fear. Still, it's an unsettling experience, sad and a little scary, to know that for someone in my community, my face is the face of what they fear.

Poor faceless one, I wish I could help you to face your fears. I too know what it is to be frightened. I would try to comfort you, if only I knew you and you knew me.

Someone has girdled a sugar pine tree upriver from my house. The tree is probably 500 to 600 years old, a century or two old back when Shakespeare was a snot-nosed toddler, the second tallest of its species in the world, 265 feet tall and 7 1/2 feet in diameter. It's been something of a local attraction for decades. Tourists stop by to admire it and generations of local schoolchildren have measured its circumference by holding hands to form a circle around it. The Forest Service is optimistic; they believe the tree will probably survive since the life-giving cambium layer was not completely severed through the full circle. They've sealed the cut and are waiting to see whether the tree will still be alive five or six years from now. No one knows who tried to kill the tree or why.

Perhaps it was simple vandalism, some thoughtless act of more or less random violence. People go into the woods for many reasons—sometimes to find peace in solitude, sometimes to loose their rage in secrecy.

Perhaps the motive was revenge, personal or political. The Forest Service and the federal government have plenty of ill-wishers. No one has come forward to claim responsibility, but there are whacked-out people out on the fringes of America, some of whom suffer from frustration and anger and some from genuinely sociopathic or psychotic obsessions. It's impossible to say who or why, and so, there are only suspicions.

"A thing of beauty is a joy . . .," well, unfortunately, not "forever," but only until some yahoo destroys it.

Among my dreams is a recurring nightmare, not a frequent one, but it comes to me often enough that I recognize it as having visited me several times over the years. I find myself traveling about in my home valley. I know it is home because it feels like home, yet it is a landscape that has been altered beyond recognition. The mountain slopes are ravaged, bleeding red strips of soil, boulders, and logging debris. The streams are clogged with mud and slash. I drive an old pickup truck along a logging road, surveying the damage. The road keeps getting worse and my heart grows heavier. The road becomes a pair of uncertain ruts climbing more and more steeply toward someplace I cannot see.

My body presses into the truck's seat as it approaches vertical. I gun the engine, the tires clawing while I hold onto the steering wheel, worried that the poor truck will spill over onto its back like some hapless metal tortoise. The truck keeps going, the road keeps getting worse, the destruction on either side more awful.

Erosion, the slow degradation of our natural and cultural habitats, is a reasonable, and pervasive, cause for fear. Most of us suspect, at times, that we are hurtling through the devastated landscape of what was once familiar, driving a doubtful vehicle on a rocky road to a future that can only be worse. The knowledge of mortality—personal, societal, and ecological—can be a source of compassion in our lives. It can also leave us feeling isolated, frustrated, and angry.

When fear grows, so does the temptation to embrace ideology. A rigid and simplistic systematic approach offers the comfort of relief from doubt and the promise of a ready-made answer to every troubling question. We fear moral ambiguity with its obligation to admit that we don't always have a simple answer, that we might be wrong, that, many times, the choices are not clearly right or wrong but often the hard, sad choice between tragedies.

I have met perhaps a dozen genuine extremists over the years, unhappy, inflexible people who force everything they see through the distorting lens of their rigid beliefs. Every single one of them has had a life history of failure, defeat, frustration, and anger, which preceded their fanaticism. They have all been losers, the lonely, the alienated, the sufferers of loss in love and in money. Their extremism provides them with a sense of being ennobled losers, the hapless victims of sinister forces rather than of their own mistakes. They are fond of elaborate conspiracy theories and they invariably attribute much more cleverness, power, and control to those they perceive as their oppressors than any person, or group of people, could possibly possess.

They are the followers, the joiners of cults and causes. Within the shelter of a mass movement they shed their personal past like shabby clothes and don the glittering theatrical attire of martyrs and heroes.

The psychological basis of fanaticism is well known. Extremists operate on a principle known as "projection": a bit of sleight of mind in which our inner turmoil finds a target outside ourselves. We detest most in others what we fear most in ourselves. To face our own fears—of inadequacy, of guilt, of powerlessness, of accepting responsibility for our own actions—is never pleasant and always difficult. It would be easier to understand that we are caught in the leg-hold trap of fear and must either die or gnaw our foot off, if only we didn't hear so many deceptive voices offering a simplistic and seemingly painless solution.

People ought not to make other people feel small and powerless and afraid. "Mean People Suck," a popular bumper sticker reads. By and large, most people, most of the time, don't need to be reminded of the need for simple decency. People know how to treat other people. The Golden Rule applies everywhere and is known to virtually everyone. Outside of a small percentage of seriously stunted individuals,

no one disputes the propriety of granting each other a measure of forbearance.

For the most part, "the evil that men do" is petty evil and we are all, at times, guilty of failing to honor another's humanity. But the difference between mass murder and rudeness is merely a matter of degree and intensity. Underlying each is an overblown sense of self-importance and a corresponding disregard for others. We are free to choose between fear and love whenever we deal with ourselves or others. Too often, we fail to choose wisely.

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