

Letter from Gustavus

March 1994

They say, these cynical days, that pragmatics is all—the balance sheet, the bottom line. Appeals to the heart are useless, they say. Well, this is a short view of history.

In our own time we have seen unshakable systems swept away by ideas and aspirations. Silent throngs of people bearing flowers have tumbled walls, pulled down icon statues. Armies with tanks have held their fire. Censors and security police have fled before the solemn liberations that opened prisons of thought and others of truncheon and torture.

The great variable of history—people with a grievance that turns into a cause—still lives, as it has over the millennia. Think of the great revolutions and movements through history, the battles against impossible odds that changed the unchangable: the Greeks and the Persians. The Jews and the Romans. And later, the Christian martyrs' conversion of Rome's decadent empire. The sweep of Bhuddism over the Eastern world. The purifications of Islam militant in the faith's early explosive centuries. The pathos, and glory, of the Children's Crusade. The thousand revolts of peasants and serfs and slaves, who often lost in the event but destroyed feudalism in the end. What of our own revolution, and the French and the Russian? And the resistance against the Nazis in Europe by people who stood naked before armed and evil brutality? And don't forget our own, ongoing Civil Rights Movement.

We have historically and in our own times seen the mighty broken by those who had no chance, no weapons, no power—only faith in their cause.

It is good to reflect on these chapters of history when we fear that all is lost. And never mind that reformers and revolutionaries finally corrupt their own ideals and have to be unseated in their turn by the next surge of truth restated.

We are in such a time now. Truths are being restated—truths about the world and what it's going to take to make it work with all these intransigent people loose upon it.

But times are different now. Time was when the T'ai P'ing Rebellion in China, in the middle years of the last century, could cause as much death and devastation as World War I, and yet be an almost unknown event for the rest of the world. Today, everything is known, and usually in great detail—like the status of an ice skater's shoelaces.

Despite the disadvantage of overload there is one great advantage of worldwide, saturation communication: Enlightened people everywhere can be reached instantaneously. We have not, up to now, had much luck igniting the common interests that might bind enlightenment into a worldwide movement toward social and environmental sanity, but we do have the common interests out there, and we have the means to unite them. The global village entire can hear and begin to act upon the restated truths of our times tomorrow at noon if we can find a convincing way to state them.

Combine this incredible technology with the articles of a new faith that overrides the tribalisms, the oppressions, the inequities that now pit us against one another, and new miracles could occur—and suddenly, as we have seen.

What, conceivably, does all this maundering baloney have to do with national parks and the people charged to manage them and tell their stories? Everything, that's what.

The national parks of the world preserve the geographies of the world's natural and cultural heritage. They contain the seeds of the restated truths—the lessons learned from natural and human history—that humankind must now put to work. We and our parks must be part of the movement that ignites the sudden enlightenment that nervously rehearses backstage for the moment of truth. We have the places where these histories happened. People by the hundreds of millions visit these places. They imbibe realities, they see physical evidence—geologic, biologic, human. Here, in the parks, the misleading abstractions that divert us, the demagogueries that pervert our thought, can be seen for what they are. Here, in the parks, we can see that nature bats last; that great empires have risen and fallen; that false, time-bound notions have led people over cliffs like lemmings into the sea. Here, in these landscapes of history, we can help our fellow beings escape the tunnels of their lives and cultures; prompt them, push them to truths that transcend the human and personal blinders that foreclose their and their children's futures.

Granted, that's thick-sliced baloney. But it's also true. The trick is to distill the meat from the fat, in your place, at your pace. And to get satisfaction when the light goes on and your visitor says, "Damn, I see it now."

Keep the faith,

Bill Brown

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