

A JOG IN THE SMOG

By Michael Ventura

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In Austin, you see them on West Cesar Chavez Street near the river, on Exposition Boulevard, on Windsor Road between Exposition and MoPac, and on the Congress Avenue Bridge. In fact, you see them in all directions, in all cities, pretty much anywhere where there's traffic.

You see men and women of every description run, jog, and power-walk beside busy two- and four-lane roads. Often, as they lope, they carry children in pouches or push their wee ones in strollers.

Just yards away from these health-minded people, clouds of poison emanate from myriad exhaust pipes – smoke engineered to be invisible and practically scentless.

We've ceased to perceive the fumes as active smells, but they're pure poison. Lock yourself in a garage and hit the gas -- you'll die in minutes. And those fumes are chock full of chemicals that take longer than minutes to do what they're capable of. Read of the dangers on any gasoline pump.

Some time back I asked my acupuncturist and my M.D. whether jogging beside traffic does as much damage as smoking a pack a day. Though separated by time and space, she and he said the same words: "At least."

I'll bet most of those joggers don't allow smoking in their homes, but I don't care about that. I care about what I call the disconnect.

Americans who jog near traffic are one convenient and obvious exhibit of our deadly ability to disconnect.

In this case, they disconnect the desire for exercise from the reality of exhaust fumes.

Their brainpower no doubt ranges across the norms from dim to sort of bright to bright to very bright. When it comes to disconnection, intelligence is not a factor. Across the board, people who jog beside traffic seem unable to perceive that breathing in deep draughts of vehicle exhaust may not be a good thing in the long run.

(No "run" pun intended.)

Smokers like me know the dangers and smoke anyway. That's addiction. Disconnection is different and possibly more pernicious – especially when it becomes a national affliction. A kind of national mental illness.

We are a disconnected country. Disconnected from the reality of our most pressing problems.

Examples abound. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of hearing about them, writing about them, and even knowing about them because the solutions are necessarily political, but our politics ranges from the raucously unrealistic to the pitifully ineffective. Knowing is as ineffectual as ignorance.

We know America's infrastructure is falling apart. For roughly a century – from the end of the Civil War to about 1960 – infrastructure was a national priority across the political spectrum, but now, politically, it's a non-issue. No one expects serious action.

We know America's health system is the worst and most expensive of the industrialized countries. Recent reforms will help more people get medical attention, but what kind of medical attention? Ninety thousand people a year die in our hospitals of

infections they didn't have before they were hospitalized. Another 200,000 die yearly of "medical mistakes" (*The New York Times* online, Aug. 1). Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, that adds up to 3,190,000 Americans dead before their time thanks to how we do medicine.

Sounds like a national crisis to me – much more destructive than terrorism. Politically, it's untouchable.

And who wants to hear, yet again, that our public education has gone from the world's best to the industrialized world's worst? Politicians talk, but all they've come up with are standardized tests that do not work. And no one expects better of them.

The United States spends more on its military than all other countries combined, but our might serves policies that win nothing and create havoc, while our veterans kill themselves at far higher rates than our enemies can dream of. Don't tell this to politicians of either party. They drain our resources with policies stuck in unreality.

These dilemmas are well known. The information is everywhere and easily confirmed – the same way everybody knows not to inhale exhaust fumes. It's just that what we know is increasingly disconnected from what we do. America jogs beside four lanes of traffic, thoughtlessly inhaling deadly crud, a people and a leadership unable to distinguish between what we want and what we need.

And don't even think about the environment. When you do, you find items like this:

"Virginia lawmakers had to omit any reference to 'climate change' and 'sea level rise' in funding a study of a growing flooding problem. Scientists say sea levels along the state coast have risen more than a foot and are still rising. Republicans conceded that flooding is a growing problem, but said there could be of no mention of 'sea level rise' because it's a 'left-wing term' (*The Week*, June 29, p.6)."

And this: "[T]he rise of the sea could turn out to be the single most serious effect [of climate change]. While the United States is among the countries at greatest risk, neither it nor any other wealthy country has made tracking and understanding changes in [polar] ice a strategic priority" (*The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 2010, p.WK7).

From the same article: "One of the deans of American coastal studies, Orrin H. Pilkey of Duke University, is advising coastal communities to plan for a rise of at least five feet by 2100. ... Moreover ... the sea will not stop rising in 2100."

All we have to say to the future is: "Good luck with that."

Seems that sea level rise – such a left-wing term! – doesn't happen uniformly. The sea may rise one foot on Virginia's coast, inches elsewhere, and yards somewhere else. We're not funding studies that might give us the knowledge to predict how high, when, or where.

Some scientists say five feet and some even say 10. Let's you and I say three. Imagine what three feet of sea level rise would mean to the Gulf Coast, South Florida, and Long Island? Among other things, it would mean tens of millions of dislocated climate change refugees.

Nobody loves a refugee. A refugee stinks of need. Most own no more than they can carry. They have no use. They soak up resources already stretched to the limit. And they will migrate where, these tens of millions? No one will want them.

Meanwhile, the Virginia coast has risen a foot and the far right spews nonsense while everybody else tolerates avoidance.

That is one deadly disconnection -- a mass disassociation from the question any farmer knows is most important: How's the weather?

James Baldwn wrote: "It is criminal to pass on despair."

But I can't pass on what I don't have.

When I was a kid, reality was represented to me as an orderly affair. Soon I discovered there was nothing orderly about it. Reality is crazy. Always has been and will be. Crazy enough, in fact, even to include the possibility that suddenly we, the people, may rise to the extraordinary and juggle this mess.

To change metaphors: The deck of our great ship tilts slightly more by the minute. Me, I'm used to the tilt by now. Guess that makes me a full-fledged citizen of the 21st century. I can walk tilted, dance tilted, make love tilted, write tilted, and I hum a tilted tune. It's a favorite of the banjo band here on our tilted deck. Goes like this:

"Rained all night the day I left

The weather it was dry,

Sun so hot I froze myself

Susanna, don't you cry."

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