

FROM WINDOW ROCK TO ALBUQUERQUE

By Michael Ventura

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For reasons that may not be reasonable, we'll dispense with names and call our trio of travelers by where they sat: Back Seat, Shotgun, and Wheel Man. Shotgun was a keen observer and she asked sharp questions. Wheel Man enjoyed the sound of his own voice, but making sense was not always part of his game. Back Seat, she could question or answer with the best, and her preference for that back seat was practical as well as wise. In that old car, the back seat was like a sofa and, so Back Seat claimed, afforded the best view.

The front seat was sofalike too. Better back support than in your newer cars. A heavy, wide, low-to-the-road cruiser, designed for comfort and long distances. (At which point Back Seat might tell Wheel Man, "Let's don't go on about the car, eh?" She's quick with aid and good advice.)

On U.S. 60 in New Mexico, west of Magdalena, this trio marveled at the Very Large Array – 27 radio telescopes, painted bright white, each about six stories high, supporting a dish wide enough to contain a baseball diamond. They range across the edges of space and time.

To borrow our mutual friend Fox Eyes' words about her child, there is nothing more thrilling than that time of life when you "discover discovery" – except, perhaps, the moment you discover that discovery can be shared, as happened to Wheel Man at age 11 when he wrote a "book" about astronomy, a brown pocket notepad illustrated with crude drawings into which he copied astronomical facts, writing (and misspelling) on the last page, "I hope anyone who reads this book benifets by it." It mattered little that no one would read, or "benifet" from, this work; his thrill was in the offering. To stand dwarfed by the Very Large Array brought that all back.

Shotgun and Back Seat, too, shined with wonder at being part of a species that reaches out for what is Other. There may be no good reason to chart this vast universe, yet we can't help feel there is something pure in discovery for its own sake. We are never more human than when we explore.

The Very Large Array recently discovered something no one expected: "a hole in the universe." Our galaxy is 100,000 light-years across and contains at least 100 billion stars. That "hole" is an area 10,000 times the size of our galaxy in which there is nothing. No stars, planets, gaseous masses, so-called "dark matter" -- nothing. This "hole" makes hash of every theory of the birth and growth of the universe. What does one do with a fact like that but bow in humble wonder and drive on?

Later, in Arizona, Back Seat and Wheel Man decided the explanation given in the brochure did not account for the Petrified Forest. Wheel Man is a speculative sort, but Back Seat is firmly evidential and practical. Shotgun impressively mixes all these qualities and was convinced by their doubts. Strewn across a swath of the Painted Desert are thick tree trunks preserved, in minute detail, in stone. Once this desert was a forest. Something turned it to stone. Some explanation must be offered to tourists, most of whom won't spend an afternoon and a morning walking from tree trunk to tree trunk

arguing with the brochure. Satisfied that the Petrified Forest was yet another mystery unsolved, our trio drove on.

Back Seat and Shotgun engaged in erudite discussion of the historical importance of Pullman porters, whilst Wheel Man struggled to tune out their voices and concentrate on vistas of mesas as they made their way to Canyon de Chelly. Toward sunset the sky was a marvel of slate and white clouds streaked with orange, indigo, and rose.

First the Anasazi, then the Navajo, have lived in Canyon de Chelly hundreds of years. Beauty is no one's possession, and to be drawn to beauty is simply to be alive, but a traveler who doesn't feel like a trespasser here isn't feeling. Trespassing happily, Shotgun, Back Seat and Wheel Man drank it all in, imbibing the beauty and enjoying one another's company too much to apologize for history.

Next afternoon, in the rain, they headed back to Albuquerque.

Somewhere around Window Rock, Shotgun told Back Seat about a conversation months before with friends whom we'll call The Sharers of the Mountain. Wheel Man's rap had gone more or less like this:

"The human psyche is not separate from Nature. It is a creation of Nature, a force of Nature. It is the nature of the human psyche to create culture – that is its *natural* function. So any cultural creation of humanity is as natural as anything else in Nature. The atom bomb, a can of Coca-Cola – like it or not, they are as natural as a rose. You needn't enjoy or approve of that fact to recognize it as fact."

Back Seat jumped all over that, as had The Sharers, particularly the biologist, a woman who pointed out that a Coke can hasn't the ability to evolve. Her argument stopped Wheel Man cold. "Before I go on with my theory I'll have to think that through," Wheel Man said, stumped.

"Have you?" queried Back Seat.

"Lots. What could be more natural than a rock? Big or small, a rock doesn't evolve any more than a can of Coke. Once formed, their elements slowly break down and become something else, but they don't evolve. The ability to evolve defines the biological, not the natural. This planet is mostly rock and water. Both change, but neither evolves. So my argument stands. Sort of."

Sentences ricocheted; digressions ensued. Back Seat said, "Conveying our intent for each other takes up a lot of our vocabulary." She contended that a sense of morality was our birthright. "We need to believe in a moral universe." "Perhaps," said Wheel Man, "but our need for that belief doesn't make the universe moral."

"So," said Back Seat, "in your 'Nature,' is there such a thing as perversion -- since, according to you, everything that *can* happen is 'natural'?"

"Terrible behavior exists within an ecology of behavior. It is not to mitigate horror that one can see a horrible act as part of an ecology of behavior larger than any particular act. Which doesn't mean you don't punish or fight what you're calling perversion. It's perverted in relation to the larger ecology of society. Popular usage equates 'natural' with 'good' – but that's a belief, not a fact. Either humans aren't part of nature at all – which is ridiculous – or we are, and that means everything we do or create is 'natural,' the result of the force of Nature that is humanity."

"Do you see right or wrong in anything? In your system is there no universal law? You would say that the wrong is part of nature?"

“The bad exists in dialectic with the good. There is *always* good and bad, right and wrong, moral and immoral – and because that’s *always* so, the existence of both must be natural. Both are part of a human ecology that is larger than either good or bad, right or wrong. I don’t mean that to do a terrible thing is OK. I just mean it’s part of what naturally happens. Fighting what’s terrible is also part of what naturally happens. That dialectic is what human society *is*. As I see it, this vision ennobles every choice for good. We are more moral than the universe tends to be.”

They drove on. Wheel Man wondered what that hole in the Space and the Petrified Forest say about “universal law.” Given his druthers, he’d rather believe in Back Seat’s moral constants than in his anything-goes Nature. He’d rather, but he couldn’t.

Who was the wiser was revealed when Shotgun asked, “If your house is on fire and you could take only one book, what book would you take?” Wheel Man didn’t hesitate: “*Out of Africa*. My favorite of all books.” An answer easily beat by Back Seat: “I think I’d take the one I’m currently reading.”

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