

Terra Madre

Life takes curious twists.

I'm a former archaeologist and Sierra Club activist who in 2006 became a dues-paying member of the New Mexico Cattlemen's Association as a producer of local grassfed beef. In 2008, I was selected to be a delegate to *Terra Madre*, the biennial convening of the Slow Food movement in Turin, Italy, where I joined thousands of farmers from around the planet in a four-day festival of lectures, workshops, and a parade of unbelievably good food.

For a boy raised in the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, during the heyday of sprawl, fast food, and disco music, this was a bewildering path. Like everyone else coming of age in a big American city during the 1970s, I didn't give a second thought to anything related to what I ate. Back then, fast food was still considered a *good thing*. Even after I joined the Sierra Club, eventually



The Start of Terra Madre 2008

becoming an activist, I rarely thought about the sources of my daily meals. If I thought about food, it was only in the context of the bad things it did to the land, such as overgrazing by cattle. But there I was at *Terra Madre*, standing in the lunch line with Peruvian beekeepers, Russian herb farmers, African gourd-growers, Italian gastronomists, Scottish students, Indian seed-savers, American cooks, Mexican activists, and Chinese academics. Above my head in the cavernous hall – a former Winter Olympics venue – I could hear the steady beat of global music. On either side of me was a buzz of conversation in the sing-song of many languages.

Most amazing of all, everyone was *happy*. I'm generally an upbeat guy, but this was an infrequent sensation for me professionally. That's because as the director of a nonprofit conservation organization, I get a daily dose of sober headlines: global warming, rising energy costs, population pressures, food riots, wars, the biodiversity crisis, and most recently (bad news for nonprofits) the financial meltdown on Wall Street. Crisis management, it seems, had become part of my job description. That can make for long days and long faces.

That's why *Terra Madre* was such a pleasant surprise. Smiles were *everywhere*. At one point, I stood in the middle of the giant hall and turned circles in silence; every person I saw radiated positive energy. Many had journeyed thousands of miles to get there, at their own expense, often tracing a personal odyssey. But hardship meant nothing. They were all smiles. The reason, I realized, was simple: they were here to celebrate *food*.

Food binds us together. It is who we are. What we eat, where our food comes from, how it's produced, who grows it and when it arrives on our table tell us pretty much everything we need to know about ourselves. Our culture is the sum of its edible parts. How we treat the animals that we eat, for example, tells us – or ought to anyway – a great deal about the state of our nation. Overgrazed range is a food issue. Population is a food issue. Food ties urban to rural, eater to grower, people to land, past to future, one nation to another, our children to ourselves. There is no such thing as a “post-agricultural” society, as author Wendell Berry has noted. We're all eaters. We're all in this together.

It was not a surprise to learn that the Slow Food movement originated in Italy, where good food is as much a part of the culture as fast food is in America. The two, of course, are connected. Slow Food was founded by activist Carlo Petrini in the small town of Bra in 1986 as a deliberate push-back against the infiltration of fast food chain restaurants into Italy. His initial aim was to support and defend good food, good eating, and a slow pace of life. The quality of food, Petrini insisted, was intimately linked to the quality of life. “By training our senses to understand and appreciate the pleasure of food,” he wrote in a document given to delegates, “we also open our eyes to the world.”

Over time, the Slow Food movement broadened its goals, I learned, arguing that diverse, healthy food is the foundation to overall human well-being and, as a consequence, the very survival of our imperiled planet. Slow Food's official mission is to protect, conserve and defend traditional and sustainable foods, primary ingredients, methods of cultivation and processing, and the biodiversity of cultivated and wild food varieties. This mission is premised on the wisdom of local communities working in harmony with the ecosystems that surround them. Slow Food also protects places of historic, artistic, or social value that form a part of our global food heritage.

In 2008, *Terra Madre's* emphasis was on youth – 1300 young farmers and students attended from 97 countries. The event included the launch of the International Youth Network. The opening ceremony featured an Olympics-style parade of nations, with each delegation dressed



in traditional outfits and carrying a placard announcing their homeland. Plenary speakers included Sam Levin, a 15-year-old student from Vermont who described his successful effort to start an organic garden on the grounds of his high school. His (youthful) declaration captured the mood of the gathering: “It’s a promise to all of you that we will finish what you started,” he said. “It’s a message to our parents that we will be the generation that will reunite mankind with the earth.”

For the next three days, Gen and I wandered in and out of workshops, listened to lectures courtesy of professional translators, browsed the global goods, and braved the jam-packed ‘Salon de Gusto’ in an adjacent building, which featured local food from every part of Italy. We also attended media events including the unveiling of the *Manifesto on Climate Change and the Future of Food Security* which was self-described as an agro-ecological response to the challenge posed by climate change. Rising temperatures meant declining food



Gen in a workshop wearing a translator

harvests, I read, which in a world already straining to feed itself posed any number of challenges, not the least of which was justice. The poor nations of the world will bear the brunt of climate change’s early effects, said the Manifesto, which means the rich, polluting nations should bear the brunt of the costs associated with adapting to those effects. It was only fair.

Perhaps most impressive of all, besides the wide diversity of people (and the smiles), was the quantity of youth in attendance. This was a bit of a revelation to me. Youth, I’ve been told over and over, don’t want to go into agriculture anymore. It’s not profitable, it’s too hard, the hours are too long, and so forth. They wanted a job in town instead, preferably involving a computer. While I harbored doubts about this claim for years, it wasn’t until Terra Madre that I realized that an opposite case could be made. For example, I spoke to one young man who had recently graduated from a university in Montana with a degree in environmental studies. His plan? To become an organic farmer. He had found a farm and was ready to get to work. “Why farming?” I asked him. It was his way, he replied, of “doing something” about the global challenges confronting us.

“Doing something” was the watchword of *Terra Madre*. In fact, it could be the motto for the *new agrarianism* – the name being given to this diverse effort taking place around the planet to create an economic alternative to industrialism. Frankly, I find this movement very hopeful and exciting. I left *Terra Madre* fired up.

Europe also fired me up. Before attending the Slow Food celebration in Turin, Gen and I visited Venice and Florence, including a B&B stay at a saffron farm near Fiesole. It was only the second time I had traveled to the continent, the previous visit having occurred when I was fifteen years old when I went to England and Scotland as part of a school trip. Europe! All my life my focus has been on the U.S, the American West in particular. I grew up in Phoenix, attended college in Portland, OR, and lived in Los Angeles for eight years before settling down in Santa Fe. Europe was both a mystery and a beacon – I couldn't wait to see its sights and learn more.

It was a lovely fall day when we arrived at Venice's Marco Polo airport – bright, warm and with a vapory softness to the air that announced “You're not in arid New Mexico anymore!” We took a crowded water bus to St. Mark's square (Piazza San Marco) where we disembarked and



St. Mark's Square on the evening of our arrival

Every piazza had its own personality too – painted doors, clothes drying on lines, peeled masonry, tiny *ristorantes*, impressively serene churches, and tantalizingly shadowed side streets.

Everything was the exact opposite of what I experienced growing up in Phoenix. ‘Normal’ to me was a single-family dwelling sited among a grid of similar cookie-cut houses, stretching to the horizon. There were no plazas where I lived, no community buildings – unless one considered the mall a communal space – no ‘heart’ to the neighborhood. There was no reason to walk anywhere in Phoenix. Besides, wasn't that why we invented the *car*?

Venetians occupied space very differently than Phoenicians, I saw immediately. Much of this difference is dimensional – Venice is scaled to humans, of course, not cars. That made it attractive on many levels, though some parts bothered me. I missed the sky, for instance, and trees.

began to pick our way through the crowds and narrow streets toward our hotel, becoming lost almost immediately.

The first day we walked from our hotel near St. Mark's to the Rialto Bridge and back, pausing every 100 yards to gape and gawk. When a slot canyon-like street would empty into a piazza we would invariably stop for a photo. The buildings were two or three stories tall, often of contrasting styles, and utterly mesmerizing.

No matter where one goes in the American West, you are in contact with space, sky, and distance. There are usually plants too, including the ubiquitous Bermuda-grass lawn. But in Venice, nature is largely confined to window boxes and an occasional tree. Nature was only a boat ride away, I suppose, but in the heart of the city it was disturbingly absent.

Venetians ate differently too. I won't go into a litany of contrasts between Italian and American diets, except to say this: I often had no idea what I was eating in Venice. I knew the elements, of course – pasta of various shapes, tomato sauces, cheese, herbs. But the delicious whole was a novelty. We observed another difference: how Venetians shopped for food. On our second day, we visited the Rialto market. Occupying the same cramped, noisy location it has since medieval times, the market pulsed with energy and vitality. From the smelly fish, the gorgeous vegetables, to the jostling and constant haggling of the shoppers, it *felt* medieval, at least to this suburban boy. Which meant it felt right – the right 'human' scale, the rightness of fresh food, the rightness of the haggling, even the way the market fit architecturally into its small space. It was as far from the antiseptic supermarket of my youth as one could possibly get.



Food market near the Rialto Bridge

As I said, I thought Phoenix was *normal*.

Not that everything was all sunlight and roses in Venice. At the end of our third day of wandering, Gen and I returned to St. Mark's Square to tour the Doge's Palace, the centuries-old seat of Venetian government. It didn't take long to learn 'the other side of the story.' Venice had a long history of repressive government despite its status as a "republic" – whatever that word meant in the 15th century. The worst of the lot was the notorious Council of Ten, who controlled the city's secret police and regularly abused the civil rights of the citizenry. Equally chilling were the dungeons, where political dissidents and others were held without trial for long periods of time. In fact, Venice's iconic Bridge of Sighs is so named because prisoners who crossed over it, on their way to the dungeons, would supposedly 'sigh' at their final glimpse of blue sky.

Say what you will about the American suburb, at least it doesn't have dungeons.

After the tour of the Palace, Gen and I decided to take a break. We sat down at a small table near the lagoon's edge and ordered two cups of cappuccino. It was a glorious day, warm, sparkling, and timeless. Other than the mammoth cruise liner packed with people that momentarily blocked our view as it glided slowly by, it could have been 1750. Venice has been in business for 1500 years, surviving all sorts of travails – war, oppression, occupation, disease, tourists. It flourished too for quite a while before entering an inevitable decline (Venice is still shedding residents). It is the epitome of a resilient city, in other words, which is more than one can say about any number of other cities around the globe that had their roots in the 9th century. That's rather impressive and probably instructive. Why did Venice survive when other cities collapsed? What



Gen relaxing on the quay

makes a city resilient? How long can Venice maintain its resilience in the *Age of Consequences*?

A short distance from our chairs, the salty lagoon lapped gently against the quay. Much trouble lurks in those gentle waves, I thought. For many years, the main concern of Venetians was that their beloved city might sink into the sea. Venice was built atop millions of logs driven into the mud of a shallow lagoon centuries ago and has been settling slowly ever since. The threat of actually sinking into the lagoon, as a result of this novel architectural strategy, became part of

Venice's existence from the get-go. So did flooding (one month after our visit, Venice was hit by its fourth-worst flood in over a century). But the worry these days is of the sea *rising*, not Venice sinking. If the predictions of climatologists are even partially correct, rising sea levels resulting from melting glaciers will claim Venice as one of the first victims of global warming.

Although the threat was tangible to us, sitting there in chairs a few feet from the water's edge, it was hard to imagine this fate on such a lovely day. Everything was perfect. The steady ebb and flow of people on the esplanade behind us, which appeared to include as many Italians as foreigners, was as timeless and unconcerned as the sea. Bells in the St. Mark's Square behind us rang out as they always had and the sun shone as contentedly on this day as it would a century from now. The wheel of time added one another quiet click to its endless progression. We sipped our cappuccinos and surveyed our world in silence.

All was well.

That's humanity's conundrum. Our brain tells us one thing – that we're doing insane things to the planet – while a peaceful breeze caresses our faces. I gave a silent, mental nod of thanks to my parents' generation for this precise moment: for our comfort, security, and freedom. Humanity worked hard to get here, doing many wonderful and terrible things along the way, all on display in Venice. And here we are, enjoying the hard-earned fruits of our forbearers' labors. We won't let go of them without a fight.

Does that mean Venice's fate is sealed? Probably. Although Italian authorities are hard at work on various strategies to protect the fabled city from drowning, including the construction of costly and complicated mechanical barrier at the main entrance to the lagoon, if we don't take significant action on global warming sea levels are projected to rise three to six feet by the end of this century. Right to where we were sitting. I tried to imagine the legs of our table and chairs disappearing into a few inches of warm water – and decided I didn't want to think about it right now. The day was too beautiful.

I took another sip of cappuccino.



A View from Europe

Sunday, September 5th, 2010, 6 a.m.. In a tiny breakfast nook, Imperial Inn B&B, Rome.



Gen, Sterling, Olivia, and I landed at Da Vinci airport at 9 a.m. on Friday, tired and stiff after an uncomfortable and for me mostly sleepless flight from Chicago. We skipped taking the train into town, opting for a thrilling taxi ride to the B&B instead. That woke us up, if only momentarily. Arriving at our destination, we were somewhat surprised to find that the ‘Imperial Inn’ resided in the corner of the 4th floor of a not very imperial building facing

the busy Via Viminale. I chose it because of its proximity to Rome’s Termini subway station, and because the online reviews were positive. Fortunately, the building had a quaint elevator that the kids loved and the Inn itself provided us with a room that featured two amenities instantly admired by the adults: a ceiling fan and sound-proof windows. Rome is hot and noisy, as well as very large and overwhelming.

We couldn’t wait to go exploring.

But not yet – everyone drooped from the long flight. Hunger ruled, so we hunted for a pizzeria, hoping to give our blood sugar levels a jolt. We found one around the corner, but the kids drooped all over their chairs, so we made quick, unauthorized decisions about pizza toppings. Fifty Euros later, we were ready for a nap. Two hours later, we forced ourselves out of our beds and into the nearby subway, which took us directly to the ruin of the old Roman Colosseum, in the heart of the ancient city. It was time to get this trip officially started.



Walking out of the dark subway station, we were awestruck by what we saw. The 2000-year old Colosseum loomed, beautiful and terrifying at the same time. We stopped dead in our tracks. Gen and I were raised in Phoenix and Albuquerque respectively, which means we grew up thinking that if something was built sixty years ago it was *old*. Our attitude changed after we became archaeologists and our time horizon shifted backward by centuries, which helped us put the post-World War II development of the Southwest in perspective. Boom-and-bust, we came to see, were part of the cycle of things. But in Rome, we knew right away that our time horizon didn’t

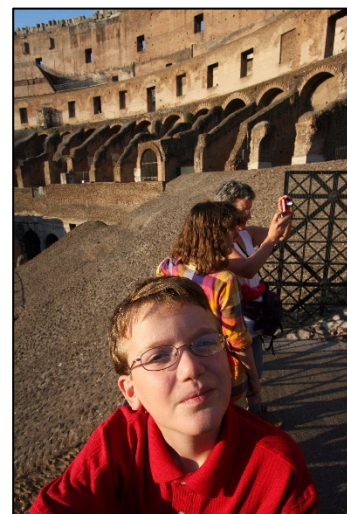


go back far enough. To be confronted with a structure that was 2000 years old and five stories high was, well, a thrill.

Crossing the street, we entered the Colosseum quickly, thanks to a pass, and began to explore the structure, which had filled with the lovely orange light of late afternoon. It reminded us of a modern football stadium, down to the numbered entrances and bleacher seats (we imagined a Roman ticket: section XV, row XXIII, seat IV). It felt familiar and comfortable, at least until we began to consider the whole bloody gladiator thing. This was no college gridiron, of course. This was a killing ground, where many, many people died grisly deaths to the cheers of spectators. It was a chilling thought. Climbing a stairway,

I recalled one of the videos Sterling and I watched before the trip, in which an English-accented narrator, after a particularly nasty episode of Roman military ruthlessness, said matter-of-factly: “The ancient Romans were not nice people.”

Indeed, the Roman civilization poses a challenge to modern-day admirers, especially eleven-year old ones. On the one hand, *what* Rome accomplished in its nearly 1000-year run is nothing short of stunning, particularly its engineering feats and countless victories on the battlefield. But those were just the headlines. What’s always amazed me was Rome’s ability to govern its far-flung empire as efficiently and peacefully for as long as it did. Sure, there were the occasional uprisings, and those pesky barbarians kept things hot on the frontiers for centuries, but in the main the empire went calmly about its business. I knew this was a substantial achievement. Either the Romans were really good at governing, really lucky, or really ruthless. I suspect it was a combination of all three, with the “not nice” part playing a major role.



This brings me to the other hand: *how* Rome accomplished its indelible mark on world history. Much of it is a shocker for us moderns. Take the empire’s heavy use of slavery, for instance, or the gladiator business, or the army’s appalling practice of ‘decimation’ in which a Roman commander enforced discipline by ordering every tenth soldier to be beaten to death by his fellow legionnaires. Slavery, however, is the tough one. Try explaining to your child why the Romans bought and sold human beings like cattle and treated them like dogs, especially when you

learn, as we did, that one in four residents of the ancient city were slaves. Then there's the level of carnage that took place in the Colosseum itself. Olivia was very upset to learn that 11,000 wild animals were slaughtered during one lengthy festival simply to satisfy the bloodlust of the crowd. *11,000 animals!* Try making sense of that to a young girl whose favorite animal is a wild wolf.



For myself, the end-of-the-republic/start-of-the-monarchy thing that took place after five hundred years of republican rule is difficult too. One can't simply blame the dictatorial aspirations of Julius Caesar. Roman politics had become hopelessly gridlocked by the middle of the 1st century B.C., with the Senate blocking (sometimes violently) attempts at reform. Elites and special interests dominated both politics and the economy, while discontent among the plebeians in the streets spread riotously. The future looked uncertain and tension rippled through every layer of Roman society. Eventually, civil war broke out, wracking the empire convulsively for a generation and leading directly to the establishment of a hereditary emperor as Rome's new form of government.

I know the ancient Rome/modern America comparison is a cliché these days. But that's the thing about clichés they have a ring of truth or they wouldn't be clichés. As we wandered around the Colosseum, awed by the way its mammoth blocks fit perfectly together and knowing that it was all accomplished by ropes, wooden lifts, and slave labor, I couldn't help but wonder about an analogy with our modern faith in technology. We have our own grand stadiums built in all shapes and sizes by the slave labor of fossil fuel. We keep building more and bigger ones too, heedless of the consequences, assuming that our ingenuity will overcome all obstacles, as the Romans undoubtedly believed as well. Unfortunately, technology hasn't helped us overcome the political gridlock in Washington, D.C. – spookily reminiscent of Rome, by the way. Is civil unrest in our future as well? Anyway, these thoughts were too heavy for the first day of a vacation. When the Colosseum closed, we headed for pasta and dessert.



It had been a very good day.

Thursday, September 9th, 2010, 6 a.m.. In the breakfast room, Hotel Caneva, Venice.

I'm sipping a cappuccino from a machine and enjoying the meditative quiet of a Venetian morning. It's a big contrast with yesterday, which dawned with a spectacular rainstorm. Thunder boomed every thirty seconds or so and rain fell in sheets. It was a portentous start to my 50th birthday, I thought. Actually, it was the second rainy day in a row, which is unusual for this time of year, or so the hotel clerk told me. I had gone downstairs to use a phone and saw that the rain had caused the adjacent canal to rise and flood the lobby. Wooden planks had been placed from the stairs to the dry part of the floor so guests could leave without getting their shoes wet. When I queried the clerk, he shook his head. "Very unusual," he said. "Usually in winter, not now." A quick flash of climate change anxiety crossed my mind. Bigger and more frequent storms are an early sign of global warming, climatologists have been warning us. But then I thought "Wait! I'm in Venice! I'm not going to think about that!"

We couldn't help, however, thinking about America. Over supper, Gen, the kids and I did a quick comparison between the Old World and the New and on many scores America didn't fare so well. Take toilets. Here, you have two choices when you flush: small and medium. In America, you mostly have only one choice: large. That pretty much describes the difference between the two Worlds. In Italy, people respect limits to their lives – street widths, room sizes, meal portions, the size of cars, the size of people. In America, limits are treated with contempt. This is one reason why Italy was such a pleasant surprise when Gen and I visited nearly two years ago as delegates to the international Slow Food gathering in Turin. We were amazed by what we saw, including the way Italians accepted limits to their lives (except maybe for restrictions on their driving habits).

We arrived in Venice on Monday afternoon without any trouble. The weather was clear, the trains ran on time, and the long walk from the station to the hotel, located near the Rialto Bridge, was, well, noisy. Our wheeled luggage clacked on the rough streets, echoing off walls of the houses, giving the under-populated city an extra air of ghostliness. After depositing our bags in the austere but perfectly acceptable hotel, we



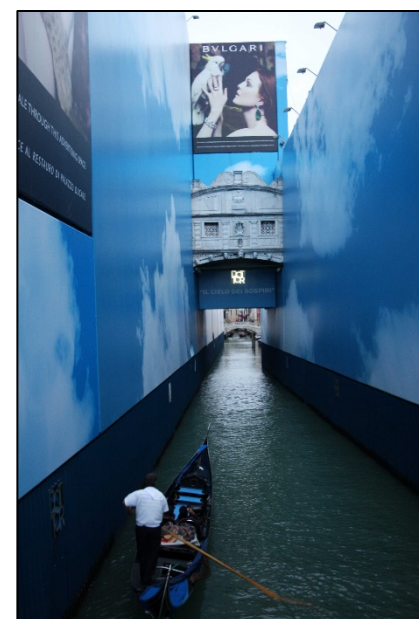
headed down to St. Mark's square, where Gen and I quickly realized that Venice isn't really for kids, or at least doesn't hold the charms for them that Rome did. Venice is for lovers, of course, as well as for those who appreciate it being a "puddle of elegant decay" as the author of our guidebook put it. But it's not really for kids. The stores caught their attention, as did the pigeons, and they liked the labyrinthine feel of the city, which Sterling took as a challenge ("This way Papa, I think"). But the subtle qualities of the city, especially the pleasures of texture that abound in Venice, were largely lost on them. That's okay – Venice has an elusive core that is hard even for adults to grasp.



Maybe it doesn't matter. When you walk into St. Marks, it's the pleasure of texture that impresses. What a place! Even on a second visit, the space and the architecture and the light conspire to overwhelm the most jaded heart. It's a performance space too: the vendors, the dueling musical ensembles in front of elegant hotels, the swarm of tourists from every corner of the globe, and the countless pigeons. Sterling and Olivia began chasing the hapless birds through gaps in the crowds almost immediately. It was a timeless and endearing sight. I was proud to give them this opportunity to chase pigeons around St. Mark's square. I think my birthday present came a few days early.

There was one disquieting moment. Leaving the square, we turned left at the waterfront and walked a short distance to the iconic Bridge of Sighs. We were stunned to see it wrapped in a splashy advertisement for a jewelry company! Later, we learned that the city had "sold" the space in order to raise funds to maintain Venice's vast and deteriorating cultural heritage. We learned that the decision was highly controversial. I bet. America has its share of underfunded projects, but would it be ok if the National Park Service sold wall space at the Lincoln Memorial to a corporation for an ad? *No*.

Tuesday morning in Venice was drizzly, so the kids pulled out their homework. I went out for a long walk. It was the last day of my forties and the drizzle fit my mood. What should I do with my fifties? I have been tilting at various windmills for twenty years and now need to slow down. Being fifty means you are young enough to *want* to keep tilting at things even though your mind says you ought to know better.



At forty, one can afford to be rather indiscriminate with one's battles, but now one must pick them more carefully. That's easier said than done, of course, but that's why you visit places like Venice with your kids – to look backward and forward simultaneously.

Late in the afternoon on Wednesday, we woke the kids from a nap and headed to a restaurant next to the Rialto Bridge which I had scouted. Incredibly, an empty table awaited us at



the closest possible spot to the Bridge itself. It felt like the supper gods were smiling on us. This was my dream, and it got better. An outstanding meal arrived. Gen ordered salted codfish with polenta, Olivia had pasta, I had pasta with seafood, and Sterling, who was indecisive for a change, picked two appetizers. Everything was delicious. We had bread, salad, and dessert. We talked and laughed and toasted. It was perfect. The night air was still and

warm, the gondolas plied the Grand Canal quietly, dodging the water buses as the sky slipped slowly from dark blue to black. I couldn't have asked for a better birthday present.

I wished it would never end.

Tuesday, September 14th, 2010, 7a.m.. Hotel dining room, Beynac, Dordogne region of France.

I just finished a lovely continental breakfast after a solitary predawn walk around the small medieval village of Beynac. We arrived late yesterday, after a wrong turn in nearby Sarlat, and immediately fell in love with the town, impressed by the huge castle that rises directly above the hotel and the soft Dordogne River that flows at its foot. After checking in, we climbed a very narrow and steep street to the castle itself, huffing and



puffing most of the way. We were rewarded with an amazing sight: a setting sun over rich farmlands embracing the tranquil Dordogne River...and another castle on the horizon! It was a balm to our weary tourist souls. That's because it had been a long two days getting here.



It began with toll road *hell*. We took a train from Venice to Nice and rented a car to reach Beynac, but our guidebook didn't warn us about toll roads on the way! As a resident of the nearly toll-less American West, I had no clue what to do when I pulled up to the first booth other than panic. We managed to get through, but at the next booth I inadvertently put the wrong ticket into an automated machine, which made it angry. I tried a credit card next, but it rejected it as American, probably out of spite. I didn't have enough coins either, so we decided to retreat. Gen jumped out of the car and asked four miffed drivers to back up, employing her best college French. It was a mess. We navigated the next toll booth without creating a crisis, but then we took the wrong fork in the highway, causing the attendant at the subsequent booth to squint at us with exasperation. It would have been comical if it hadn't been so stressful.

Eventually, the toll gods decided to stop tormenting us and we made it to the Pont du Gard before closing time. This is the famous fragment of a 2000-year old Roman aqueduct that carried water from the mountains to the ancient the city of Nimes. It stretches spectacularly across the Gard River, three stories high and riddled with beautiful Roman arches. We arrived just in time to see the structure ablaze with fiery sunlight. I was awestruck by the aqueduct's perfect blend of form and function. It's an engineering marvel, of course, especially for its day, but it is also intensely beautiful. "What an empire!," I quipped to the kids as we strolled along the structure's base. I tried to think of something comparable in America and the Golden Gate Bridge came to mind, which was also constructed in an era where form and function meant something.

After a too-brief visit to the aqueduct, we hustled back to our car. We still had a long way to go and were eager to get to our next destination – the medieval city of Carcassonne – though the prospect of additional toll booths along the way made my hands sweat. But the toll gods smiled on us. At the last booth, late at night on the edge of the Carcassonne, we literally used up our last Euros. If the toll had been one Euro more...well, I don't know where we would have slept. That's because as we pulled up to our overnight destination, an old abbey, the gate was literally being closed for the evening. Two minutes later and we would have been searching the city for a place to lay our weary heads.



The next morning, I slipped out of the abbey and walked the short distance to the moated entrance of Carcassonne, which is a compact medieval castle and city surrounded by tall walls and filled with tourist shoppes. Dodging a steady stream of decidedly unmedieval delivery trucks, I wandered through the dampness, marveling at the moody architecture. Carcassonne was saved from oblivion by a mayor in the 19th century who had it restored to its former architectural glory just in time for the invention of the *vacation*. He did an admirable job – the place is a feast for the senses, as well as a hulking testament to the Age of Chivalry. As we prowled around the fortress after breakfast we gawked at the huge scale of everything. The Romans were here first, of course – we could pick out their distinctive brickwork by now.



Later, while taking a long walk around the outer ring of walls, I marveled at the apparent lack of concern for personal safety on the part of the French. Frequently, nothing stood between us and a twenty foot fall. In America, we would have been fenced in by handrails or ropes, especially if it were a state or national park. Looking in our faithful guidebook, I read a confirmation that the French don't worry about safety as much as we do. You can go largely where you want, it said. It is an interesting contrast. Sometimes it feels like you have more 'protection' in America but less freedom.

At the approach of the noon hour, I directed us toward lunch in a pint-sized piazza in the center of town that I had discovered during my predawn ramble. It was now full of tables, waiters, dappled shade, and eaters. Three different restaurants shared the open space, which made for a fascinating dance of food, spirits, foreign languages, buzzing waiters, clinking glasses, and gorgeous light falling from the heavens. It was a feast for all the senses, the eyes especially. Later, we hit the gift shoppes and then elbowed our way back through the crowds to the drawbridge where we lingered, soaking up the sights one last time. Tourism is a lot like the lunch, I thought to myself: you eat a great meal in an exotic location, enjoying every bite, and then suddenly it's over. The glow fades, leaving you to wonder what the other dishes on the menu tasted like. You vow to return, snap a photograph and move on.

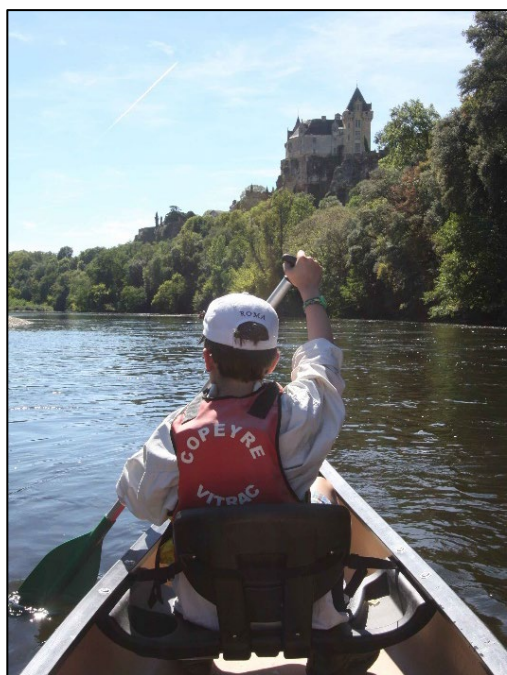


And hope that the toll gods keep smiling.

Thursday, September 16th, 2010, 6 a.m..

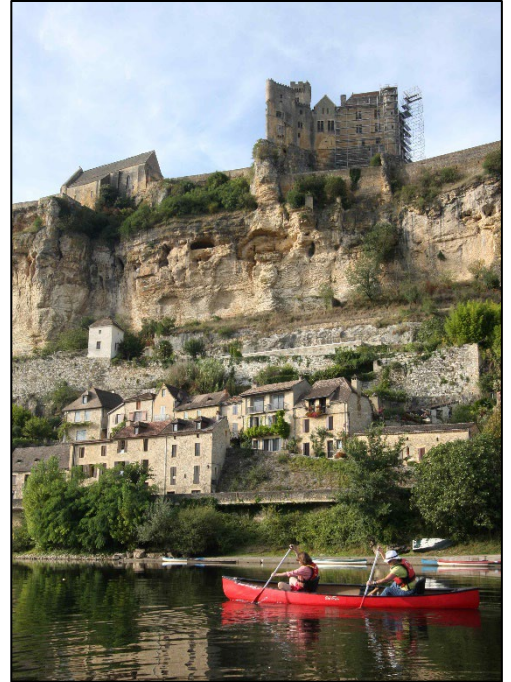
We are seriously hooked by Beynac and the Dordogne. We're due to pack up today and drive to Paris, but I'm not ready to leave. That's because I found a slice of *Agraria* here and it has set me to thinking.

It started with our hotel and the lovely little village that surrounds it. Sandwiched between the river and the castle, with the countryside only a short walk away, Beynac strikes me as almost ideal (except for the constant flow of truck traffic just outside the hotel's front door). It's a tourist town, to be sure, complete with art galleries and souvenir shoppes, but underneath the carefully maintained gloss is a real town that harmonizes perfectly with its surroundings. Take the 'tabac' shop just up the street, for example. Owned by a very nice older couple who were amused by our daily purchase of exactly-the-same sandwiches, it is small, tidy, well-worn and full of things we needed. Located on an attractive street that is small, tidy and well-worn, it has a 'rightness' of scale that contributes to a sense of 'placeness' that resonates throughout the village. Actually, we found this 'placeness' everywhere we went.



We found it on Tuesday as we canoed the Dordogne River. After a morning of homework, we were picked up by the canoe company and driven to Carsac where we were given two canoes and rather unceremoniously deposited on the river bank by an unsmiling employee. It was a gorgeous day, warm and still. Sterling and I stepped carefully into one canoe, Gen and Olivia into the other. We shoved off into the wide, glassy river, knowing it would be a memorable day. For the next five hours we paddled, drifted, dreamed, and oohed as we floated past limestone cliffs, pale tourists, old castles, farm fields, bridges, campgrounds, villages, and solitary houses. To call it an idyll would be an understatement, though the kids grew weary towards the end and Gen's tender back began to hurt her from the exertion.

As we paddled, I thought: this area has it all – beauty, history, culture, farming, wilderness of a sort, fine food, civility and a deep-rootedness that is literally foreign to me. It was an *agrarian* vision – a harmony of land and culture (without the historical exploitation of agricultural workers, I hope). Wendell Berry calls agrarianism “another way to live and think” and contrasts it to the destructive industrial model of living and thinking that has dominated the world for the past half-century, especially in America. Agrarianism is “not so much a philosophy as a practice, an attitude, a loyalty and a passion,” writes Wendell, “all based in close connection with the land. It results in a sound local economy in which producers and consumers are neighbors and in which nature herself becomes the standard for work and production.”



I had no idea, of course, if the agriculture we saw near Beynac was ‘sustainable’ or not, but it looked like it to my eyes. There certainly was a strong sense of harmony to the landscape. It definitely gave me the impression that we were drifting through a slice of *Agraria*.



This feeling was reinforced yesterday by a drive to nearby Lascaux and a tour of the famous cave paintings of wild bison, horses, deer, and aurochs (cattle). Wherever we drove, we saw an enchanting mosaic of woodlands, farmsteads, verdant grazing lands, picturesque villages, and healthy-looking riparian areas. We didn’t see any overgrazing, obvious signs of erosion, or anything that looked like a feedlot. Maybe we were looking in the wrong places, but I doubt it. The area reminded me of the Amish country I’ve visited in central Ohio, only without the horse-and-buggies. This wasn’t a coincidence – the Amish heartland is another slice of *Agraria*, a place where people have managed to live more-or-less harmoniously *with* the land, economically and ecologically, rather than against it.

This is one of the main lessons we learned from the existence of 17,000-year old paintings at Lascaux. The cave’s presence suggests that humans have managed to occupy this area for a very

long time more or less *sustainably* – an observation that recalled the famous lament by the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold who said that the “oldest task in human history is how to



live on a piece of land without ruining it.” Somehow, apparently, the residents of the Dordogne figured it out. How did they do it? Was it the soil? The rain? The area’s remoteness? The culture? I knew that similar country had been ruined by hard use in other parts of the world. What was different here?

This is important because we live in an age where the issue of sustainability is becoming more and more critical, especially as the pace of ‘land ruination’ picks up due to population pressures, energy demands, and food shortages. It behooves us, therefore, to study examples of sustainability in action, rather than in theory. However, to many American conservationists the Dordogne may have little appeal. After all, there isn’t much wilderness left here; it’s all cultivated, to one degree or another, which is one reason why there are no wild bison, horses, or cattle around

anymore. If it’s wildness you’re after, then rural France may not be the best place to look. But if it’s harmony you’re after, as Aldo Leopold was, then the Dordogne fits the bill.

And harmony is what I’m after.

I believe the 21st century will be dominated by the issue of declining human well-being; and in some places it has already begun. If our ability to find food, fuel, fiber, water, and shelter becomes strained then 20th-century priorities such as ‘wildness’ or endangered species protection will drop way down our ‘To Do’ list. This is why it’s important to find slices of *Agraria*. We need its harmony along with its food. We need to understand why human settlement persists so well in some places while in other places it has not. It’s not simply a matter of rain, soil, climate or other local factors; plenty of places with ample amounts of each have been ruined over time. The difference, I think, is culture – by which I mean our values, norms, and economic incentives. When they harmonize with the land, all flourishes; when they do not, despair follows.

This is the biggest lesson I learned on this trip: how our values shape our decisions. We can't simply employ different technology or "be smarter," as a popular corporate advertising campaign insists, in order to confront a crisis without confronting the value system that created the crisis in the first place. Whether it's the brutality of empires, the pleasures of texture, lessons about limitations, questions of form and function, or the importance of placeness in our lives, the view from Europe suggests that Americans need to ask themselves hard questions about values before we get much further down the road.



All photos by Courtney White.

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My Story / A View From Europe