

Life Is Great

With a flick of the switch, I banish the darkness.

It's 4 a.m. on a Monday [in spring 2010] – time to get some work done before the sun, or the kids, stir. In the bathroom, I twist both faucet handles at the sink and watch groggily for a few seconds as the water twirls merrily down the drain. Where does this water from come? An ancient aquifer nearby, as I recall. Can't be rainwater, I say to myself as I splash water onto my face in an attempt to ward off a desire to go back to bed, we only get twelve inches of precipitation a year here if we're lucky. Which reminds me. Drying my face with a cotton towel, fresh from yesterday's laundry, I make a mental note to buy rain barrels for the roof, adding it to a lengthy To Do list.

Leaving the bathroom, I wend my way into the kitchen where I make an unsteady beeline for the coffeemaker. I didn't touch a drop of the evil brew until I was thirty-one, giving in only after a move to our home at 7000 feet and a subsequent snow storm that winter. I grew up in the desert and lived in Los Angeles for years, so snow was a difficult concept for me to grasp initially, requiring what has since become a comfort food – a warm cup of coffee. In any case, I am grateful that a steady and apparently endless supply of the aromatic roast is available to someone who lives far from a coffee plantation. If there were a coffee god, my daily ritual would include an oblation of thanksgiving, perhaps in the form of a teaspoon of sugar.

Mug in hand, I drift into the living room and settle into a chair at the computer desk, waiting for the caffeine to work its magic. Although it's not yet summer, the windows are cracked open enough to let dryland smells into the house. It's a remarkable privilege to live here in this beautiful place, in what geographers call a high, cold desert. Prehistorically, there was only enough food, water, wood, and arable land to support small populations of people, most of who had to move frequently to find fresh resources or dodge a drought. It's totally different today, of course... except for the same sparse amounts of local food, water, fuel, and arable land. Thankfully we have oil, without which I wouldn't be able to live here. Perhaps another offering is in order, this time to the gods of petrochemicals, who we never, ever want to anger.

I punch my laptop on. The computer is another of life's confounding miracles. I never knew I needed one – and now can't imagine my life without it. When Gen and I were in college in the early 1980s, the personal computer had not yet made its debut on campus. That meant we had

to rely on *typewriters* to graduate. This fact makes us absolutely archaic to our children and their tech-obsessed friends. There were no mobile phones either, I tell them a bit proudly, or iPods, though we had something called a Sony Walkman for music. Typewriters? Cassettes? Land-lines? The whole idea gives them the shudders. As my laptop finishes its warm-up cycle, this line of thought provokes a question: what did we actually *do* with all that free time way back then? As I recall, we skied, and hiked, and drove to the beach. Watched TV. Read books. Cooked. Talked. *Old people* stuff.

The computer is ready to go. As I scoot my chair closer to the table, another question flits through my mind: where does our electricity come from? Not nearby, like our water, that's for certain. Is it from the nuclear power plant near Phoenix? The coal-fired plant near Four Corners? The natural-gas facility near El Paso? The big dam on the Colorado River? A wind farm near Albuquerque? All of the above? Two hours later, I shut down the computer, rise from the chair, stretch my stiff muscles, then stride purposefully toward the kitchen to start the breakfast marathon. I switch on a lot of lights, even though the dawn is brightening quickly outside. I stab our old radio to life and reel instantly at the news: terror threats, political gridlock, greed, avarice, unemployment, upcoming elections. After a few minutes, I stab the radio off, not wanting to scare the kids. I switch on the CD player instead, filling the kitchen with the reassuring strains of a Mozart concerto. Then I turn to the main event of the morning: the breakfast menu.

Like many of their friends, our twins will only eat from a short list of acceptable items, very few of which correspond with anyone else's preferences, necessitating a kind of daily food ballet. For example, our daughter likes sausage, which we buy organically and locally, soaked in maple syrup from Vermont. She'll eat English muffins too. But our son won't touch either one. He prefers industrially-produced corn dogs, which no one else will eat (for various reasons). However, he likes Mexican meals, so burritos are popular in our house – except with our daughter. Gen prefers granola with yoghurt, or polenta, or Irish oatmeal, none of which the kids will touch. I like eggs, which we procure from our small flock of chickens in the backyard. Gen loves them too, but the kids told us the other day that they are “tired” of eggs. Our daughter still likes homemade waffles, though our son is “tired” of them as well. He'll eat fried potatoes, but she won't. She likes cereal, but he doesn't, of course. They are united, however, in their opposition to anything green at suppertime, which we force them to eat anyway. We do agree on organic milk, butter, hamburger, pasta, and rice, fortunately. Otherwise, we might starve.

We won't starve, of course. That's because our food system is a miracle, I think to myself as I pull a package of frozen sausage from the freezer and place it in the microwave oven for defrosting. We can eat what we want – or refuse what we want – from wherever we want, at any time we want. Peaches in February? No problem. Shrimp in a high, cold desert? No sweat. Coffee from an obscure island in the South Pacific, chocolate from Europe, lettuce from California, plasticware from China, honey from Albuquerque, canned green beans from god-knows-where? No problem. Even the microwave is a miracle. Look: the sausage is ready in a minute, ready for frying. I pull out a non-stick pan – another miracle – and place it on the stove. Hash browns, eggs, English muffins, marmalade, corn dogs, sliced cheese and meat for lunches, and sandwich bread quickly follow. It makes for a heap of food on the kitchen table, suggesting that a prayer to the food gods is probably in order as well.

But I don't have time to think about divinity this morning. Everyone is late getting out of bed. There's a traffic jam at the shower, and no one is making their lunches yet. I set the table, feed the dog, and turn down the Mozart when a minor dispute erupts between the kids over the last remaining berry-flavored juice drink. We flip a coin. "Honestly," I say to myself as the juice drink is dispatched to a lunch box triumphantly, "what would our grandparents have thought of such an argument?" What would they have thought of our breakfast in general? They would have considered it a miracle as well, I'm sure, though they might have been appalled by how much food ends up in the trash can or the chicken bowl. Waste not, want not, as Gen's mother used to say, and pass the marmalade please.

We gather at the dining room table to eat, finally, though instead of saying grace we talk about the day's calendar: what's happening in 5th grade today, who has what music or karate lesson where and when after school, what needs to be done on the homework front, and so forth. The discussion is complicated by my imminent departure on a business trip, which the kids have forgotten. Faces fall, but only for a moment. I'll be right back, I tell them. Zipping to and fro across the country makes air travel feel like just another item on the daily chore list, except for the hugs and kisses. But I don't have time to contemplate that right now. I need to clear away the dishes.

Shortly before 8 a.m., Gen and the kids trundle out to the car and head out to school and work respectively. We ought to walk, after all school is only half a mile away on an easy path, but for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, we don't. We drive, like every other family, filling up the school's too-small parking lot with every conceivable model of SUV and mini-van known to

humanity, often piloted by solitary parents in a hurry (and on cell phones). Sometimes I take a quick peek at the bicycle rack outside the library to see if anyone has ridden to school that day. The district recently expanded the elementary program from K-6 to K-8, and one might logically expect an unusually adventuresome seventh or eighth-grader to ride his or her bike to school. Alas, it's always empty. And why not? Gas is cheap, cars are convenient, we're in a rush, and kids don't like to walk much anymore. It makes perfect sense.

After a final round of good-bye kisses, the family pulls out and I retreat to the kitchen to put things away. Later, after some bill-paying, a walk with the dogs, and a shower, I settle down with a stack of maps and guidebooks to Europe. Gen and I turn fifty this fall and we've decided to treat ourselves and the kids to a whirlwind tour of Rome, Venice, and Paris, with lots of Roman ruins and medieval castles in between. Ever since Gen and I visited Venice in 2008, it's been a dream of mine to celebrate my birthday alongside the Rialto Bridge, which I'm determined to fulfill. Why not? Other than the expense, it's easy to get to Europe and once you're there it's easy to get around. My plan is to use it all: planes, trains, buses, taxis, and a rental car. Everything is in the guidebooks – where to go, what to eat, where to sleep. Besides, it'll be a history lesson for the kids. Us too – a first-hand look at western civilization, including centuries of wars, hardships, political upheavals, religious rifts, technological breakthroughs, economic strife, and social progress...all so we can watch cable TV, surf the Internet, goof off with video games, and get diabetes and cancer.

And travel to Europe.

I put the map and guidebooks away, pack my travel bag quickly, check on the chickens, and head out the door. I jump into the truck and head into town, where I need to put in time at the day job and run a few errands before catching my flight. It's a beautiful day, bright, clear, and warm. Mid-May at 7000 feet in a cold desert is full of the promise of summer. I can't wait for the T-shirt weather to begin. I slip onto the Interstate and nestle into the flow of traffic that will carry me the short distance to town. I scrupulously obey the speed limit, despite knowing what's coming. Soon, my bucolic attitude evaporates as a steady stream of cars and trucks speed past me. I notice that nearly every vehicle carries only one person (mine included). A few drivers talk on their cell phones, but most zip along in air-conditioned isolation. I'd prefer to take a bus to work, but there's no practical public transportation available, despite high gasoline prices (nearly \$3 a gallon today). That speaks volumes about our priorities as a society, I think.

A few minutes later, I pull into the small, graveled parking lot at my office. After a round of ‘good mornings’ to co-workers, I climb the stairs to my office, which still smells faintly of leather. Last fall, in a fit of indulgence, I purchased a nice leather couch to place below a window. Seeing it this morning, I suddenly wonder: where did it come from, who made it, and what is inside it? Most of my office is populated with things that have a history – an old wooden table inherited from my parents, bookcases from our days in Los Angeles, framed photographs from a previous attempt at a career, maps accumulated from various trips, photographs of the family, and a wide variety of knickknacks picked up over the years from all corners of the American West. They make the mass-produced leather couch an anomaly (or is it the other way around?). All I had to do was pull out the credit card and pay for it. Like so many things in our lives today, its purchase was fast, convenient, and anonymous.

I settle down to work, which means I must stare, once more, deep into a computer screen. Perhaps because I grew up in an archaic age, I stubbornly resist being sucked into the virtual 24/7 world that has consumed so much of our society. I’m still an 8-5 guy, which means I don’t do much email on the weekends and I don’t do social media at all. My cell phone is just a phone. It doesn’t entertain me, check the stock market, or cook supper. I haven’t even programmed it with the phone numbers of friends and family. I’m required to memorize their numbers. That’s alright. I’m trying to inhabit as much of the 3-D universe as possible, fearful that our expanding obsession with the 2-D world is setting us up for a major fall. But that’s another topic for another day.

At noon, I shut everything down, pack up, say some quick goodbyes, and jump back into the truck. I need to run a few errands in town, starting with a pit stop at the bank to cash a check. My next stop is a natural foods grocery store. I need snacks for the trip. Cruising briskly down the aisles, I realize the store is another mundane miracle of our modern era. It is packed to its organic gills with every conceivable type of food, and in impressive abundance. The cornucopia includes: fresh French bread, humanely-raised chicken, a dozen varieties of olive oil, wild salmon from Alaska, goat cheese from Switzerland, yoga magazines, wine galore, buffalo burgers, and an entire aisle dedicated to chips, salsas and other snack foods. Today, I grab two apples, some organic dried apricots, a premade pesto-and-turkey sandwich, a bag of potato chips and a cup of coffee to go. I’m in-and-out in under ten minutes.

That’s a miracle too.

Soon, I'm on the Interstate, heading south. My mind drifts. The cornucopia in the natural foods store recalls a quote from the poet Ogden Nash that I read years ago. "Progress was good for a while," I think he said, "but then it went on and on."

Indeed.

Approaching the airport in Albuquerque, I sidle off the freeway and shake my head clear of road thoughts. It's time to concentrate. Airports are miracles too, though increasingly stressful ones. The two-hour flight is uneventful and I arrive at my destination a few minutes early. Deplaning, I pick up my suitcase at a carousel, secure my rental car from a generic company (I can only tell them apart by their colors), and hit the road – all in under thirty minutes. That's amazing too, but it's all so familiar and routine to me by now that I don't pause to consider it.

I aim for the freeway and promptly make a wrong turn, though I don't realize it right away. When it finally occurs to me that I'm heading in the wrong direction, I punch the radio on. There's no rush – my appointments are not until tomorrow. As I drive, I dial the radio, discovering that it has nearly *two hundred* stations. Wow. It's satellite radio, which is still a novelty for me. Plowing through the stations one by one, however, I am quickly reminded of the modern cable TV dilemma: despite an explosion of choices, there's still nothing on. I settle on a classical music station.

My wrong way drive brings a shoe store into view. I need a new pair of tennis shoes pretty badly, so I pull off the freeway and aim the car toward a cluster of outlet stores. Once inside, I am overwhelmed again by our economy's skill at *sheer volume*. The place is packed with shoes, which makes it feel like the organic grocery store, only with laces and socks. Drifting over to the men's section, I am confronted with at least seventy different variations on the basic tennis shoe. Making matters much worse, a friendly salesman tells me that it's two-for-one day. If I buy a pair of tennis shoes, I get another pair for free – any pair in the store. I look around. There must be six hundred pairs of shoes visible. I thank him, swallow hard and start eeny-meenyng my way through the inventory. Eventually, I emerge from the store dazed but triumphant, with two shoe boxes in a bag.

Back in the rental, I consult a map before driving to my hotel, which is conveniently located between the highway off-ramp and a large shopping mall. After checking in and depositing my belongings in the room, I drive over to the mall to explore supper options. The mall itself is ringed by chain restaurants, giving the impression that I'm entering an orbit around a giant, many-mooned planet. It certainly feels like a universe unto itself. Slipping beneath the outer ring of restaurants, I opt for a local sports-themed place on the planet's surface instead.

Inside, I am immediately assaulted by a dozen very large television screens, each blaring a different sporting event. As I wait for a table, I scan the mammoth room, noting that every available space on the walls is occupied by something neon, mostly beer advertisements. I feel like I've entered a holy place – the Temple of Brew. Observing my awed expression, one of the temple's acolytes approaches and guides me to a booth where I plop down and dutifully order a beer from a very long list. I have no idea what I'm getting. I don't drink much, but I don't want to offend the beer gods either,

A burger later, I head back outside where I decide to take a walk through the mall's mammoth parking lot. After a long day of sitting, I need the modest exercise. I didn't see a green park anyplace while driving, however, so I have to settle for the gray lot, which is sparsely populated, thankfully. I've heard that shopping malls are in trouble, victims of the Internet and changing consumer habits. This is a curiosity to me personally because it means the Rise and Fall of the Mall took place during my lifetime. I remember the excitement the grand opening of a very big mall caused in my Phoenix neighborhood when I was fifteen or so. And talk about a Temple! I loved wandering around in its air-conditioned comfort, gawking at the goods (and the girls). But if the shopping mall was another miracle, it was a short-lived one, apparently. Maybe we didn't make the right sacrifice to the mall gods.

It's a lovely evening. But the beer has made me droopy, so after three figure-eights around the lot, I climb into the rental, drive back to the hotel, go to my room, grab a book from my bag, and slip into bed. There's no reason to turn on the TV, not even curiosity. No need to catch up on pop culture tonight. Besides, it's been a long, amazing day. It's a remarkable world, I think to myself as the god of drowsiness begins to work its magic.

Progress *is* good...*was* good...still is. I know it went on too long probably...but that's alright for the time being. Things are good...but for how much longer? The book slips in my hands. Despite our troubles, I feel fortunate to be alive today, now, here. I should give thanks to somebody, I think groggily...the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, perhaps, or my parents. Perhaps an offering to another god is in order...maybe the god of rental cars. Or central heating. Or fluffy pillows. The book slips again. I put it down.

I reach for the light and, with a twist of a button, darkness engulfs me once more.



Lucky Us

Apparently, *we are* the future.

This thought crossed my mind while waiting to turn left at a stoplight near my office last fall. As I waited an elegant, old-timey convertible sailed into the intersection, its top down, the wind blowing through the hair of its tanned occupants, both of whom appeared to be in their sixties. The guy behind the wheel sported a gray ponytail and the woman seated next to him wore five or six silver bracelets on her right arm. From their casual but upscale clothes to the relaxed way their bodies seemed to be one with the convertible, the couple looked every bit the epitome of success, retired to the good life and enjoying their presumably hard-earned leisure. As they crossed in front of me, I glanced down at the car's license plate, noting that the vehicle was from out-of-state, though I couldn't tell from where. What I didn't miss was the plate's vanity message.

LUCKYUS.

"I guess so," I said aloud as the convertible sailed out-of-sight.

The green left-turn light popped on. After navigating the turn, I eased into the 'slow' lane of the busy boulevard as I normally do in order to let my fellow drivers, who always seem to be in a greater hurry than I, rush past. But this time I let my truck coast a bit in the traffic, my foot barely pressing the accelerator as I suddenly found it difficult to concentrate on the road. The image of the convertible and its relaxed couple stuck in my mind's eye like a needle trapped in the groove of a vinyl LP record. Over and over, they sailed nonchalantly through the intersection. LUCKYUS. LUCKYUS. I suddenly felt a surge of anger. LUCKYTHEM. UNLUCKYUS!

Recognizing a side street, I stepped on the brake and tugged the steering wheel sharply to the right, wanting badly to get away from all the hurrying and rushing going on in the world. A few moments later, I found myself pulling up in front of a small city park, whose emptiness and bucolic greenness offered a salve to my disquieted emotions. I knew this park. Gen and I lived near here for a while, back when Sterling and Olivia were infants, and we came to this little park often usually with kids and a dog in tow. Today, however, my only neighbors were memories, which suited my mood just fine. I have a weakness for reminiscence, as Gen knows, especially when it involves our children.

I decided to climb out of my truck to mingle with the ghosts. I strolled to the play structure and sat on the end of the slide, my hands inside my coat against the sudden chill in the air. Staring

at the neatly clipped grass and the wind-tossed leaves scattered here and there, the surge of anger returned. “UNLUCKYYOU” YOUKIDS. I recalled a bumper sticker I saw on a mammoth, gas-guzzling recreational vehicle one winter in Phoenix while visiting my parents years ago. It said: “*We’re Spending Our Children’s Inheritance.*” I remember laughing. Funny!

No one is laughing now.

I kicked at the soft sand below the slide. Slowly, my anger dissipated into a sort of deep resignation. It’s no longer a joke, alright. We *are* spending our children’s inheritance, quickly too. The ironic humor of the bumper sticker was now officially painful. After all, I doubt this is what our parents and grandparents had in mind exactly. Their generations *saved things*, for their family and for their country, so *our* lives could be better, more prosperous, more leisurely, and more enriching than theirs. They planned and saved for the misty Future. And they did a damn good job of it too. Whether it was fighting a world war in defense of freedom, providing a quality education for their children, creating new national parks, or paying off a home loan, they tangibly enriched the lives of their descendants in a variety of important ways.

Our response, however, to their planning and saving hasn’t been as thoughtful. Basically, we looted their savings accounts. Cleaned them all out. Sure, we did some good things with their money, such as send our own children to college, but a lot of it was squandered, burned up or thrown away. And when the inheritance began to run low we broke out the credit cards and began racking up huge debts, literally and metaphorically. We’ve been very selfish, frankly, and I think it would have saddened our grandparents. Not only did we fail to save for the no-longer misty Future we carelessly indebted our children in the process. And now the bills, both large and small, are beginning to come due.

I kicked at the sand again and dug my hands deeper into the pockets of my coat. The air was still. The ghosts had all suddenly vanished.

For most of my adult life, I have worked as a conservationist, which means I have tried professionally to save things. When I was young, I campaigned to protect our national parks from a variety of threats, including air pollution, commercial development, and privatization. In the mid-1990s, as part of my new role as a Sierra Club activist, I went to Capitol Hill to lobby for the creation of new wilderness areas. I organized workshops on the ecological dangers of clearcut logging on national forests, on the positive role that biodiversity plays in nature, and I helped the Sierra Club publish a citizen’s guide on how to blunt the environmental damage caused by

hardrock mining in New Mexico. I led activist outings to southern Utah, organized letter-writing campaigns, testified in public hearings, and fought a cynical, back-door assault on environmental regulation at the time called ‘takings’ legislation. I’ve written letters, columns, and op-eds, met with Congressional delegations, and helped organize an effort to convince the federal government to purchase a privately-owned 90,000-acre ranch near Santa Fe and make it available to the public. I tried my damndest, in other words, to save things for the Future.

This effort continued in 1997 when I co-founded the nonprofit Quivira Coalition. My conservation work now took on a collaborative bent. I had learned a hard lesson from my Sierra Club experience that the missing piece of conservation was the positive role that *people* played. Environmental problems, I came to understand, were as much about *economics* as they were about the environment, thus requiring economic solutions to go along with ecological ones. I learned this by listening to the many heated confrontations between activists and ranchers and loggers over the years. Collaboration, not confrontation, was the key. Saving things, I saw, meant prudence, care, good stewardship, and positive relationships as much as it meant passing bills, creating new regulations, or establishing new parks. That’s why I chose a quote from farmer and author Wendell Berry as Quivira’s unofficial motto: “We cannot save the land apart from the people; to save either, you must save both.” Saving both became my mission.

In many ways, I had returned to the roots of conservation. The motivation to save, conserve, and use well economically so that those who follow us may prosper is as old as the movement itself. And it was one of the chief reasons why conservation grew quickly into a national cause, embraced by Americans of all stripes, including many U.S. Presidents:

“I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use our natural resources, but I do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob by wasteful use, the generations that come after us.” – Theodore Roosevelt, 1900

“The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation, increased and not impaired in value.” – TR, 1907

“We think of our land and water and human resources not as static and sterile possessions but as life-giving assets to be directed by wise provision for future days.” – Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1935

“As we peer into society’s future, we – and I, and our government – must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow.” – Dwight Eisenhower, 1961

In another illustration, here are quotes from my three conservation heroes:

“The major premise of civilization is that the attainments of one generation shall be available to the next...Civilization is not the enslavement of a stable and constant earth. It is a state of mutual and interdependent cooperation between human animals, other animals, plants, and soils, which may be disrupted at any moment by the failure of any of them...It thus becomes a matter of some importance, at least to ourselves, that our dominion, once gained, be self-perpetuating rather than self-destructive.” – Aldo Leopold, 1937

“What a young American just coming of age confronts now is not a limitless potential, but developed power attended by destruction and depletion. Though we should have recognized the land as a living organism demanding care and stewardship, we have treated it as a warehouse, and now it is a warehouse half emptied.” – Wallace Stegner, 1981

“If we are serious about conservation...we are going to have to come up with competent, practical, at-home answers to the humblest human questions: How should we live? How should we keep house? How should we provide ourselves with food, clothing, shelter, heat, light, learning, amusement, rest? How, in short, ought we to use the world?” – Wendell Berry, 1995

Note the change in tone of these quotes over time. In the pre-WWII era, the tone was optimistic, though tinged with worry and warning. We still had time, most conservationists argued, to mend our ways and ensure a bright Future for our children and grandchildren. This tone changes a lot, however, after the war as the American economy began to grow dramatically. Take Stegner’s quote about America as a ‘half-emptied warehouse’ – words that might have shocked Teddy Roosevelt in 1907 but by the mid-1980s shouldn’t have shocked anyone paying attention. And that’s before the real looting started as the global economy heated up. By the start of the 21st century, we were well on our way to emptying the planetary warehouse. So far, the answer to Wendell’s anguished question about how we should use the world is *to use it up*.

Somewhere along the way in the century from Teddy Roosevelt’s day to the present, we, as a nation, slipped from the future tense to the present tense. We stopped using words such as “shall” and “will” and “must” and “tomorrow,” replacing them with “now” and “today” and “mine.” We saved things here and there – at least for the moment – but the principle activity of my generation, front and back-enders combined, has been to take, take, take. It’s as if we decided to shout at Teddy Roosevelt “Thanks for the forests and the parks, we really appreciate them!” while waving a hand from the front seat of a sporty convertible, its top down, the wind blowing through the hair of its smiling occupants. “Thanks too for the cheap gasoline, the appliances, and the great coffee.”

Somewhere along the way, in other words, we stopped thinking about our children. How else can we explain the colossal burden of resource depletion, financial indebtedness, and rising

global temperatures that we are now officially bequeathing them? Of course, we didn't do these things *deliberately* to our kids. No parent would allow their child to be exposed to physical danger if they could help it. That's one of the main roles of a parent – to protect your children from harm. We're supposed to care for them, provide for them, and nurture them in ways that help them succeed in life, including raising them in a healthy environment. We're supposed to make their future brighter, not dimmer. Their lives should be better than ours. That's why we're supposed to save things, make personal sacrifices, and put their interests ahead of our own. Right?

Wrong, apparently. We're not saving much of *anything* anymore, it seems. Oh, we're still trying, but under the specter of accelerating climate change one has to wonder what we're actually saving in the long run. Take wildlife, which has been the focus of so much conservation work over the last century. Have we really 'saved' the whooping crane? The polar bear? The whales? The marmot? Tigers? Elephants? Is the future brighter or dimmer for these species? Dimmer, I think. And is it any less unethical of us to diminish the lives of plants and animals than it is to bequeath a diminished world to our children?

Perhaps more to the point: did we save *us*? After all, it is becoming clear that we haven't conserved or saved things that are required for our well-being either. Take fossil fuels. Did we conserve them for future generations, stretching out a finite supply of these precious and irreplaceable minerals for centuries, or did we burn them up as fast as possible? What about the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere – did we protect it from rising past a dangerous level, thus ensuring a climatically stable planet for our grandkids, or did we watch indifferently as totals rose? What about fresh water? Did we use it prudently so that the next three billion people to walk the planet will have adequate supplies of this life-giving liquid, or did we pump it like there was no tomorrow? The answers aren't clear yet. All I can say for certain is that somewhere along the way tomorrow became *today*.

LUCKYUS.

I kicked at the sand below the slide again waiting for the anger to dissipate. I hate having these sorts of thoughts. I hate thinking that we've failed our children. I want to have hope and feel joy and work hard to save things for Sterling and Olivia and their friends. I know that I'm not free of guilt or blame, that I've done my fair share of consuming too. I've been one of the Lucky Ones as well. Still, I've tried to live modestly, carefully, and thoughtfully. And I tried to save things.

I dug my hands deeper into my coat pockets. Behind me, ghosts began to stir in the play structure. I could hear their laughter. Looking over my shoulder, I saw two-year old Sterling climbing the stairs slowly, step-by-step, while his sister stood at the top of the stairs unsure about her next move. My nostalgia returned. Forget the Future, I'd give anything to have my two-year old twins back again, just for a few minutes. The wind picked up again. The ghosts dissolved. I stood and walked across the clipped grass and the tumbling leaves. At the truck, I paused. I turned to survey the little park again, this time letting the wind blow away all thoughts of children, past or future. I suddenly realized that I needed to complete the chore that I had set out to do before becoming distracted by the old-timey convertible and the gray ponytail. I need to get back to the office too, back to my day job of saving things.

Later, I looked up one of my favorite conservation quotes. It was written by Walter Lowdermilk, an American soil scientist who in the wake of the 1930s Dust Bowl was sent overseas by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to study the role of soil erosion in the downfall of ancient civilizations. His travels took him to Greece, Italy, North Africa, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel. In all cases, he saw that the failure to save fertile soil from destructive overuse and erosion precipitated the decline of each culture. At the end of his tour, he composed his thoughts into an "Eleventh Commandment" which he read live in a broadcast over Jerusalem Radio in June 1939. Re-reading it, I felt determined to renew my conservation work, determined to keep trying to save things:

"Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. Thou shalt safeguard thy fields from soil erosion, thy living waters from drying up, thy forests from desolation, and protect the hills from overgrazing by thy herds, that their descendants may have abundance forever. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful fields shall become sterile stony ground and wasting gullies, and thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth."

