

What's Ailing the Land

By Tayo Basquiat

I like to play with words and to discover interesting etymological associations and today I invite you into my weird little world to consider the word continent. The Latin *continentem* is the root for continent which in the 1550s via Old French was applied in its sense of “holding together” to describe a ‘large land mass’ in physical geography. A prior usage of *continentem*, however, applied more generally to the exercise of self-restraint and self-control, employed in Scholastic moral philosophy to mean exercising self-control of one’s actions through knowledge. It is in this sense that our mothers and fathers scolded us with “You know better than that so act like it.” So here comes the fun part: in common English today, we retain the usage of continent as a term in physical geography but we have lost the sense of continence as self-control EXCEPT with specific reference to being “incontinent,” referring exclusively to the medical pathology of being unable to retain feces or urine. This narrow application fails to help us diagnose a far more pervasive affliction ailing us: moral incontinence toward the continent. We should know better than to do what we do to the land but we lack the continence, the self-control, to act according to what we know we should do. I invite you to think of a couple of examples of moral incontinence toward the continent that you personally suffer from as I point a finger at a couple of particularly egregious examples.

I was at a hearing before the public service commission recently concerning reclamation of land after it's been mined. Testifying was Jim Melchior, current president of Coyote Creek Mining Company and former land manager for North American Coal for 35 years. He was questioned as to his view of the proposal to add more restrictive language into the permitting process, reflecting practices that require reclamation of land post-extraction to "as good or better condition." His response: "I wouldn't be opposed if it was economically feasible to do it." This man, his business, and anyone who buys that line is suffering from moral incontinence. The very idea that we should go ahead and do something we know will diminish the health of the land for the sake of profit or not do something we know we should do because to do so isn't economical, means moral incontinence has set in.

Aldo Leopold wrote, "Cease being intimidated by the argument that a right action is impossible because it does not yield maximum profits, or that a wrong action is to be condoned because it pays. That philosophy is dead in human relations, and its funeral in land-relations is overdue." Unfortunately, quite the contrary, this type of moral incontinence toward the continent is in full flower. It seems we cannot restrain ourselves, lost all self-control, with regard to what we are willing to do to the land.

To take another instance, science tells us that depleted uranium has a half-life of 4.5 billion years. We bury that stuff in geological

lockboxes for chemical sludge known as waste pits and tanks, if we bother burying it at all. Sometimes we just leave it in a big pile along the banks of the Colorado River near Moab, UT. But whether we bury it or not, we are knowingly engaging in a practice that yields a waste product that sticks around in virulent, toxic form for 4.5 billion years, creating a perilous landscape for you calculate it—how many generations comprise 4.5 billion years? I don't know why I bother asking because people don't even seem concerned about the place they are leaving for their great grandchildren much less generations billions of years into the future. Don't worry, we tell ourselves, liners don't leak. Yeah, right, and exactly what is the half-life of a liner? Will it withstand 4.5 billion years or will we just see pieces of it dangling off the bucket of a backhoe dredging through the sludge? Maybe some lucky kid's sandbox will show up on top of one these things because by the not too distant future, we won't even know where all these dumps and pits are. People are dumping crap all over without admitting they are doing so—trying to get away with dumping things like lithium ion batteries in landfills or waste socks in Noonan or a few thousand gallons of brine here and there---so how could we think for a moment that we have the will to let future generations know what we did and where we hid the bodies? Moral incontinence toward the continent, my friends.

When people have the medical condition of incontinence, they seek help in dealing with the problem. They don't walk around with

urine running down their legs or a mess in their pants, shrugging their shoulders and saying, “Well, when you gotta go, you gotta go, I guess.” No one who has their wits about them would do such a thing—we all have sympathy for someone having to deal with such problems, but we do expect they would take some measures to save themselves the embarrassment or the discomfort of the results of their incontinence; and if someone without wits was suffering from incontinence, people around them wouldn’t let that continue. Medication, surgery, undergarments would be tried on their behalf. We would no doubt consider it cruel, inhumane, not to mention unhealthy to let someone sit around in their own excrement and urine.

I don’t know how far this analogy will take me but I’m advocating here for people to deal with their moral incontinence with the same diligence, pains, and effort they’d take to address medical incontinence. When Jim Melchior gives an answer like he did, to me that is the equivalent of sitting in public in your own crap like it’s no big deal. The problem is that for some reason, we’ve come to accept such answers as completely rational, normal, “hey, if ya gotta go, you gotta go” right? You gotta do what you gotta do. People gotta eat and have jobs. We’ve looked at the land for so long as a resource that we barely recognize our membership in it and utter dependence upon its health. Humans hold fast to the perverse idea that we are the center of biosphere, everything else’s reason for being. Like undisciplined toddlers, we don’t like to be told no,

that we shouldn't or can't do something we want to do. Don't like to be limited. It's like we enjoy sitting in our own crap or maybe we just don't have our wits about us anymore. Something is deeply, seriously wrong with a society that is doing what we are doing to the land and to the more-than-human world.

So, this is the disease, moral incontinence. Is there a cure? Well, my friends, I'm certainly not optimistic. But, I am hopeful. Optimism is cheap. It is kindred to boomerism and I've had just about all I can take of them both. My hope for a treatment or maybe even a cure for moral incontinence toward the continent rests in my conviction that Aristotle and the Stoics were right: human beings can train themselves in virtue. Every day, every action, every choice is part of the formation of the habit of virtue or vice. First though, people have to recognize not just that they have moral incontinence but decide their current affliction is detracting from their quality of life, that it is unbecoming to remain in such a state, and that they have to do something about it. But the difficulty of that realization and then pursuing the remedy is why I'm hopeful rather than optimistic. The difference, eloquently stated by David Orr, is that "Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. Hopeful people are actively engaged in defying or changing the odds. Optimism leans back, puts its feet up, and wears a confident look knowing that the deck is stacked." If the deck is stacked, folks, it's stacked against moral continence.

Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up. I like that idea a lot. There's a recognition of difficulty, sweat, effort, skin in the game, in those who dare to hope. Many models of virtue, hoppers with their sleeves rolled up, are in this room today. They have been practicing hope, each action and choice strengthening their moral continence toward the continent, but even the best among us still have work to do. "If the culture forces us to live in ways we don't believe in, then we have to change the culture," says Kathleen Moore. "Given the urgency of the question, we may need to start with conscientious objection. There are things we must refuse to do, and there are costs for that refusal." I am going to end today with a list of ideas for you to "hope with your sleeves rolled up," daily activities that instantiate conscientious objection and will inspire virtue in others while helping you become more morally continent toward the continent yourself.

1. Go outside and take a kid with you as often as you can. Walk to the river or hike out to a slough and see where the wild things are.

"This is what is the matter with us," D.H. Lawrence wrote, "we are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of life, and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table."

2. Commit to walking or using a bicycle even if you are inconvenienced by doing so. Experience the wind messing up your hair, the sunshine in your eyes, and breathe in the unpleasant exhaust fumes. Let that convince you to walk or bike more often so someone doesn't have to breathe exhaust fumes from your car.

3. Get rid of cable or dish or whatever television service you subscribe to. It is filling your mind with wants and urges, undermining your self-control, helping you rationalize your participation in consumerism. Extractive industries exist to meet our wants and supply the many things we've speciously decided are needs as well.

4. Learn the names of the birds, trees, and plants that grow in your neighborhood. Then take the next step of learning every species identified in the June 2014 issue of North Dakota Outdoors magazine as a conservation priority because its habitat has been compromised and degraded by human encroachment.

5. Learn to communicate with plants. In an interview with Stephen Buhner featured in the December issue of Sun magazine, I was reminded of the sentience of plants, that not only should you talk with plants but you should listen to them. Buhner makes the too

often neglected observation that plants want to heal us. Think about plants we consider invasive species: aren't they actually showing up in damaged, ill-used, ravaged places, seemingly rushing in to protect or consternate further degradation? Compelling thought. Sit yourself in the middle of the woods, prairie or a flowerbed and listen. See what happens.

6. Try an experiment in contentment: refrain from grocery shopping until you've used up what you have on hand or refrain from buying new clothes for some specified length of time. Clothes take a long time to wear out and even then can often be repurposed. Get out of the habit of donating old clothes as an excuse for buying yourself more new clothes.
7. Learn where your favorite products come from, how they are made, and how they get to you. What costs were born by the land in that process? Do these products help or hinder your moral continence?
8. See if you can reduce your contributions to the landfill by engaging in activities like composting, not buying things in plastic packaging, recycling, and repurposing things. Landfills, by

definition, have to be the epitome of moral incontinence toward the continent. Where did we ever come by such an idea anyway?

9. Cut down the amount of meat you eat.
10. Turn your lawn into a haven for the birds and the bees, the flowers and the trees. If you live in an apartment and have a patio, put some planters out there. Better yet, see if there is a community space that you could turn into a haven.
11. If you are going to drive, be more thoughtful about the use of your vehicle. Pretend you live in old time days and can only go to town once a week or something, forcing you to combine errands, rethink needs, and be more judicious with the expenditure of petroleum resources.
12. Study your water usage, keep track down to the flush, and agree as a family or pledge to yourself to implement water saving strategies. Do you need to flush every time? Do you need to shower every day? Do you need a 10 minute shower? Do you even need a 5 minute shower? And speaking of water, find an alternative to the toxic cleaning chemicals that get flushed into the water supply.

13. Learn how to fix something or pay the price to have someone else fix it instead of throwing it away. If you know that a device you intend to buy has a planned obsolescence of two-five years or less, don't buy it. Find a better device or one that can be fixed and then eat the costs of fixing it instead of throwing it in the landfill.

There, 13 ways for you to “hope with your sleeves rolled up,” and inspire others while restoring moral continence toward continent. These ideas may strike some as trivial compared to the destructive moral incontinence already let loose upon the world, but look at them as training exercises. You can start small and build up your self-control and over the course of a lifetime your moral continence will increase. When you exhaust the suggestions on this list you can move on to more challenging exercises. If you've mastered the list already, you need to suss out moral leakage you tolerate because you feel justified by your moral continence in other areas. We all have those revelatory moments when we discover we've been walking around with messy pants. I have those moments, too, but again, this is why I am hopeful, not optimistic. This isn't an easy affliction to deal with, but the healing process is life-affirming and has intrinsic rewards. I've seen how taking some of these steps in my own life has been habit forming, has inspired others, has led to greater self-limiting with respect to what I'm willing to take from the more-than human world. I still experience moral incontinence more

often than I'd care to admit, but I'm working on it. We often hear that we have environmental problems. No, we don't. What we have are human problems. We need to treat our moral incontinence toward the continent.