

Christmas 2014 in Town and Country
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Mt Baker north of Seattle

In my 2013 Christmas letter, I described the “widespread takeover of every cultural feature in our country by corporate money and power”. This expansion of corporate money and power has continued exponentially in 2014 to influence business, education, medicine, communication, food, and government at all levels. The worst ever dysfunctional do-nothing Congress arrived and departed in 2014. The power and reach of our oligarchic plutocracy perhaps reached its peak a week ago when Congress passed the 2015 budget spending bill. In that bill the Wall Street big banks and big corporations whose tsunami of money has overpowered democratic government by turning most legislators into puppets, achieved the overthrow of the mild Dodd-Frank regulation which limited sale of derivatives. They have been reinstated. Banks can dabble fraudulently again to increase their profits and if they lose severely, American taxpayers can (and will) once more cover their losses. Leibniz’s “best of all possible worlds” has arrived for bankers. They can privatize their profits and socialize their losses.

Instead of an America defined as a country “of the people, by the people and for the people” (Lincoln), we are moving via Citizens United toward a nation “of the super rich, by the super rich, and for the super rich... When billionaires can spend hundreds of millions of dollars to buy an election for candidates who support the super wealthy, this is not democracy...but plutocracy” (Senator Bernie Sanders)

So why don’t “the people” vote the super rich and their supporters out of office? Money Power not only has taken over government policy but also has made sure that the majority of voters remain confused and even disenfranchised. Let’s look at media. The rigor or integrity of where political analysis would go if it simply followed the evidence without fear or favor has been compromised. For years, America’s political press has been stuck in a fact-free model of neutrality, often covering even the most obvious of lies as ‘one side’ of a dispute, e.g. climate change. This cult of neutrality allows exaggeration or lies to parade across TV screens. As Paul Krugman noted “If one party declared the earth was flat, the headlines would read “Views Differ on Shape of Planet”. When the political culture moves sharply in one direction, journalism now comfortably and uncritically goes along with it, sticking resolutely to a neutral center. The center, more than anything in the United States, is now determined by where Big Money is located. But in the real world, this “neutrality” is cowardice. And when the press becomes the handmaiden of power, nothing hastens the demise of democracy faster. Lies should not be a debatable question. The best recent book on this betrayal of democracy by the

media is *Dollarocracy* by John Nichols and Robert McChesney. Most of the above comes from this book.

But one can fight back. I now have the Unitarian Universalist of the Blue Ridge congregation meeting near my farm in Sperryville. The UU parent organization in Boston is sponsoring a Green Sanctuary Certificate program whereby each congregation can gain a GS Certificate by pursuing twelve projects - four of which need to bring about environmental sustainability and at least two to achieve social justice.. An example of one which pursues both sustainability and social justice is to support the Sierra Club in their fight with the Koch brothers whose money and influence has pre-empted the use of solar power in Virginia. Through Alec, the lawyer group financed by the Koch brothers, a bill was written by them and then passed in 2011 by the Virginia Assembly which imposed a stand-by fee of \$3.77 per KW which with taxes ran over \$4.00 per KW. So if homeowners with a 10KW solar system wanted to hook up to the utility grid, they would average \$40.00+ per month extra costs for infusing solar energy into the system. If they had 20KW solar capacity, their extra cost could escalate to \$75.40 per month. Dominion Power imposes these stand-by charges and now Appalachian Power Company wants permission to do the same. Sierra Club opposes this permission. UU Blue Ridge will help oppose it and actively seek to raise the alternative fuel goal of Virginia from its present anemic 15% to 25% by 2035. If you live in a red state which produces fossil fuel, this same Alec law was probably passed by your state assembly. To write and have state assemblies pass corporate beneficial laws is the goal of Alec.

Let's go to more pleasant matters. More pleasant were three trips taken with Diane O'Callaghan (a widow three years younger than me) to the Florida Keys, Pacific Northwest, and Ecuador. Some pictures and brief comments follow below:

I always imagined the Everglades to be a shady tree covered "glade", a jungle. It's not. While mangrove forest islands and knolls are frequent, the Everglades (for the most part) is an invisible river of grass with little knolls of mangrove or pine trees here and there. And it's being taken over by pythons.

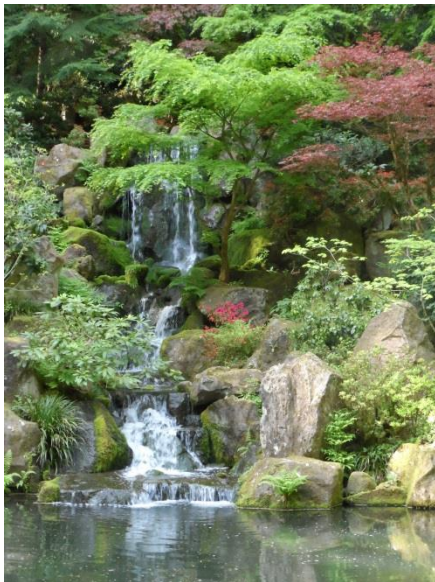


River of Grass: Everglades



Still here: Bring on the pythons

Visiting my sister, Anita, in Skagit County, north of Seattle, in late April, we were astonished by huge fields of tulips. Dutch settlers set up nurseries in Skagit Co. devoted to raising tulips whose bulbs are then sold to Holland which in turn sells them to the world as Dutch Bulbs. On the way down to San Francisco, we stopped off in Portland, a beautiful city with a world class Japanese garden looking its best in early May. Patrick Story, a GMU colleague of mine, with his wife Karen, retired to Portland. He's still an active populist which is what we need these days. We also stopped off at the Avenue of Giants (red woods) on our way down to SF. Unlike me, Diane embraces other modes of communicating than analytic reasoning. She's a tree hugger (see picture) Our trip ended in San Diego with a visit to my brother, Alfred and wife Helga and son, Mitch. They live on Mission Bay without furnace or air conditioner. It's c. 70 degrees all year long. Nice.



First postmodern bldg.. built in
US: Michael Graves' Portlandia

Japanese garden: waterfalls (above)

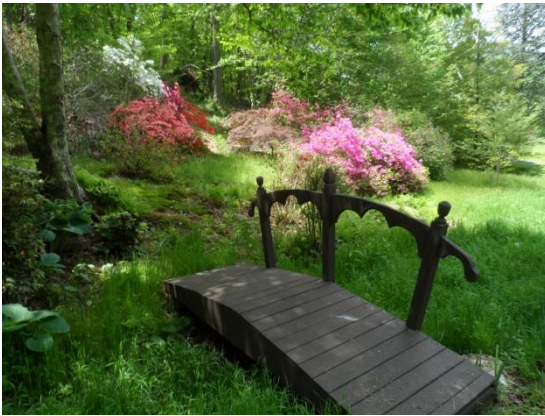
Japanese garden: Xeriscape (below)



Diane: Finding the wavelength



diane communicating



Repaired Bridge on Grasmere Farm



Repairing bridge on Grasmere Farm



On the equator



Balancing an egg on end



Imaburo Volcano near Cotacachi



Clean Cotacachi street

Of the ten best places to retire in the world, AOL tells me that Ecuador is #1. Diane's former neighbor and good friend from Hawaii, Carol Nervig, retired to Cotacachi, Ecuador, so we had access and guidance from an insider. Some comments: Driving in Ecuador is like driving in West Virginia but the elevation is twice as high, c. 10,000 feet. There are no trees on the mountains, only at their base. Towns have trees – mostly palm trees. Temperatures range from 40 degrees at night to 80 degrees during day. Ecuador is on the equator and north of Quito is a tourist attraction called "Middle of the World". Go there and observe a tub of water on a table with leaves floating on the surface. A plug is pulled, the water flows down into a pail. But on the equator, the escaping water creates no whirlpool; repeat fifteen feet north of the equator, the water creates a counter clockwise whirlpool; repeat fifteen feet south of the equator, the water whirls clockwise. Also on the equator, one can balance an egg on its end (see pictures). Every climate zone of the world is found in Ecuador, so every fruit or flower in the world could be found there. Some churches in Quito date from 1650 and are UNESCO Heritage sites. Their interiors are baroque styled, gold gilt with saints and Bible figured niches, and fresh

flowers everywhere. Very similar to Baroque churches in Germany. Ecuador uses US dollars as their currency. Gas runs \$2.00 a gallon. But don't drive. Rent a taxi with driver at \$75 a day. Frequent thunder storms occur in afternoons and store owners wash their sidewalks every morning. All is clean (see pictures)

Enough. Hope you made it through this year and will enjoy a better next year.

Love Vernon



Grasmere Farm Cottage