

The odor of oil

I had an odd dream. Someone had loosed incredibly clever and poisonous snakes into my home. The snakes were somehow an embodiment of evil. I was superficially fearful and cautious, yet I knew I could not let them go or let them out of my sight, since this would mean certain death for someone at some future point. So I was required, through the context of the dream, to set the fear aside & dive headlong



into my new role as snake hunter. I was reaching with my bare hand through the dustcover into the cavity at the bottom of an upholstered chair, with fair certainty that I was about to be bit – not afraid at all, but just mad and frustrated -- when I decided to get up & make coffee instead of continuing the uncomfortably silly dream....

I take all this activism stuff in bite-sized chunks, just a little each day or when inspiration pulls me further -- since it's too overwhelming to ever hope to change the world. I think at some point we have to find our own peace in the journey, rather than basing our evaluation of success or failure on the appearance of visible change.

I am emboldened through simple virtue of the fact I've already been bitten... there is no remaining risk -- no cause for fear... so I may finally speak the truth without any desire to diminish it -- or the pretty paper typically used to hide it.

Some eighty years ago (or thereabouts), oil was discovered in Kilgore, Texas (about half an hour east of Tyler). Kilgore quickly became an industrial gold mine, quite literally filthy with sludge and ooze and uninhabitable for even the meanest of laborers.

So the new oil companies set up housing and infrastructure in two nearby locations. The dirty workers were put up in Longview, just east of Kilgore -- and the shiny managers were put up in Tyler, safely west of Kilgore and out of range of the ooze. Given the prevailing winds from the southwest, Tyler is literally upwind from Kilgore, so that not even the odor of oil or labor could reach us.

So Tyler's entire history is colored by this desire to not know, hear, see, smell or speak of anything nasty or dirty or bad. It was recently listed as one of the top 10 retirement destinations in America precisely because we have no crime, no poverty, no AIDS and no gay people. Even today, when you ask members of the Ladies' Auxiliary where one would find those (bad) things, the unanimous and rehearsed response



booms back, "You'll have to go to Longview for that... we don't have that in Tyler."

Of course, Tyler has bigger "denial" issues than most places, yet it also points to similar "crises of self-imposed blindness" across America. My job, therefore, is simply to shine a little light in places most of these people would rather be left alone... in the dark. And the only reason I do this is because lives are at stake. The "Ladies Auxiliary" may prefer to believe that their attitudes and actions hurt no one, so I'm out there telling story after story after story of how they are damaging and in some cases killing their own families, children and community.

Troy Carlyle