

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 8 Venice Rising

Gen and I made it to Venice.

We bit the financial and logistical bullet and departed for Italy in mid-October. Our excuse was my selection as an American delegate to the biennial *Terra Madre* ('mother earth') conference in Turin. This is a global convening of farmers, chefs, academics, students, and activists involved in sustainable agriculture, organized by Slow Food, a movement launched in 1986 by Italian gastronomist Carlo Petrini as a deliberate push-back against American-style fast food. This was the third Terra Madre event, but my first and I went as a producer of local, grassfed beef – which tickled the former Sierra Club activist in me.

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.

Unofficially, it celebrates really good food.

Over time, the Slow Food movement broadened its goals – arguing that diverse, healthy food is the foundation to overall human well-being and, as a consequence, the very survival of our imperiled planet.

For example, the 2008 edition of Terra Madre featured the debut of a 50-page *Manifesto on Climate Change and the Future of Food Security*, which stated that agriculture is both part of the problem as well as the solution to climate change – which the Manifesto's authors called the ultimate test for our collective intelligence as humanity.

They noted that industrial agriculture presently contributes at least one-fourth of greenhouse gas emissions and has destroyed vital aspects of knowledge of local ecosystems and agricultural technologies which are necessary for making a transition to a post-industrial, fossil fuel-free food system.

The solution they propose is "ecological farming" – a systems-approach that is based on photosynthesis and which, therefore, has a potential to be fully renewable. These systems are local, sustainable, and diverse, especially biologically.

"Biodiversity is the basis of food security," wrote the authors. "It also increases resilience to climate change by returning more carbon to the soil, improving the soil's ability to withstand drought, floods, and erosion. Biodiversity is the only natural insurance for society's future adaptation and evolution."

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These words resonated with me and I wanted to learn more – but not yet. That was in the future. Before wading into the workshops, lectures, press conferences, and networking awaiting us in Turin, we wanted to be tourists for a while – enjoying our moment in the Late High Fiesta sun.

The place to start, of course, was Venice.

I had been to Europe once before, to England as a befuddled fifteen-year old. But that was an eon ago – long before any “adult” worry about carbon footprints and rising sea levels. Gen had been to Venice on one of those dizzying post-high school graduation adventures that blur Paris-Venice-Rome together in a jumble of hotels, photos stops, and rude behavior by the locals. She didn’t recall much of the city, except its exotic feel, and was eager to see it with fresh eyes.

It was a lovely fall day when we arrived at 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. Marks square where we disembarked and began to pick our way through the crowds and narrow streets toward our hotel (becoming lost almost immediately). Within minutes, my brain made another announcement: “You’re not in Phoenix either!”

My mind could not compute what my eyes were seeing. In 1966, I emigrated to Phoenix, Arizona, from Philadelphia in a covered station wagon, arriving on my 6th birthday – at precisely the moment that High Fiesta took off. Phoenix would explode in the next two decades, growing from a dusty backwater burg to an air-conditioned megalopolis of mind-bending proportions. Today, it is one of the biggest cities in the U.S., covering an area larger than Los Angeles!

In other words, I grew up in sprawl. For the next twelve years, until I left home for college (and eventually moving to the City of Angels), I knew nothing but horizon-to-horizon, no-holds-bar suburban growth. I thought it was all perfectly normal too – the way things were meant to be, the next step in the long road called Progress. It was a logical conclusion – after all, I saw sprawl everywhere I traveled: Tucson, Salt Lake City, Albuquerque, Denver, Los Angeles. Land-gobbling development, with its acres of asphalt, steady hum of air conditioners, and endless merchandising, became my ‘default’ setting for the current stage of western civilization. Intellectually, I was aware that alternative patterns of occupation existed, especially in a far-off land called ‘Europe.’ But despite my brief visit to England, that’s all it was – an abstraction.

Until we arrived in Venice.

For the next three days, we walked. There were no cars, of course (which was an odd feeling itself), but there weren’t big crowds either, which meant we could make good time through Venice’s labyrinth of streets.

The first day we walked from our little hotel near St. Marks to the Rialto Bridge and back, pausing every 100 yards, it seemed, to gape and gawk. The little bridges over the canals were the best, especially if a gondola passed underneath. When a slot canyon-like street would empty into a piazza (square) we would invariably stop for a photo. The buildings were two or three stories tall, often of contrasting styles, and utterly lived-in looking. Every piazza had its own personality

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too – painted doors, clothes drying on taught lines, peeled masonry, tiny ristorantes, impressively serene churches, and tantalizingly shadowy side streets.

Everything was the exact opposite of Phoenix, in other words. In fact, Venice reminded me of the way prehistoric people once occupied the American Southwest – in dense clusters of multi-story buildings surrounding plazas of various sizes. Phoenix was utterly different. ‘Normal’ to me was the single-family dwelling sited on 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 God invented the *car*?

Venetians occupied space very differently than Phoenicians, I saw. Much of this difference is dimensional – Venice is scaled to humans, not cars. That made it attractive on many levels, though some parts bothered me. I missed the sky, for instance, and trees. 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 piazza tree – and pigeons. Nature was only a short 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. Growing up in Phoenix in the 1970s, most of my meals came from just two sources: fast food chain restaurants, or the freezer. My mother – a reluctant cook (to put it mildly) – would create a meal by pulling meat from the freezer, followed by a frozen vegetable in a plastic bag. The meat would go into the oven and the plastic bag would go into a pot of boiling water. When supper was finally assembled, we often consumed it in silence in front of the television.

I doubt that’s how Italians ate in the 1970s.

We observed another difference: how Venetians shopped for food. On our second day, we visited the Rialto farmer’s 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.

This thought prompted a plaintive lament to Gen about our upbringing as we exited the market grounds: *what were we thinking?*

It’s something to consider. I want to digress from my narrative for a moment in order to share a quote by Jim Kunstler from his excoriating history of the American suburb titled, aptly, *The Geography of Nowhere*. Keep Venice in your mind as you read this:

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“Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading – the jive-plastic commuter tract home wastelands, the Potemkin village shopping plazas with their vast parking lagoons, the Lego-block hotel complexes, the ‘gourmet mansardic’ junk-food joints, the Orwellian office ‘parks’ featuring buildings sheathed in the same reflective glass as the sunglasses worn by chain-gang guards, the particle-board garden apartments rising up in every meadow and cornfield, the freeway loops around every big and little city with their clusters of discount merchandise marts, the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobic-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call “growth.”

He concludes his rant with a comment straight from the Age of Consequences:

“The newspaper headlines may shout about global warming, extinctions of living species, the devastation of rain forests, and other worldwide catastrophes, but Americans evince a striking complacency when it comes to their everyday environment and the growing calamity that it represents.”

Complacency certainly describes my experience with the American suburb. 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. Marks 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 has a long history, we learned, of repressive leadership 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 what we would call today a citizen’s civil rights. Equally chilling were the dungeons, where political dissidents and others were held without trial for long periods of time (evoking shades of current events, unfortunately). 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 didn’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 vacation cruise liner that momentarily blocked our view as it glided stately by, it could have been 1850. Or 1750. Or older.

Venice has been in business for 1500 years, we noted, surviving all sorts of travails – war, oppression, occupation, disease, tourists. It flourished too for a quite a while, before entering an inevitable decline (despite its legendary status today, Venice is still shedding residents). It is 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 AD. That’s rather impressive, we thought, sipping our coffee – and probably instructive too. Why did Venice survive when other cities collapsed? What makes a city resilient?

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This raised another question: how long can Venice maintain its resilience in the Age of Consequences? Ten feet from our chairs, the Adriatic Sea lapped gently against the quay. Much trouble lurks in those gentle waves, we 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 a muddy lagoon centuries ago. The threat of sinking, as a result of this novel architectural strategy, became part of Venice's existence from the get-go. So did flooding (a month-and-a-half after our visit, Venice was hit by the fourth-worst flood since 1872; water rose 61 inches above normal, inundating St. Mark's Square in thigh-deep seawater for days).

But the worry these days is of *rising*, not 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 such a fate on such a day as we were enjoying. Everything seemed 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. The bells in the square 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 more quiet click to its endless progression. We finished our cappuccinos and surveyed our world in silence.

All was well.

That's humanity's conundrum, of course. Our mind tells us one thing – that we're doing insane things to the planet – while a peaceful breeze caresses our faces. As Gen often notes, one could argue that all of the history of western civilization has aimed for this precise moment: comfort, security, freedom, and really good coffee (for many of us, anyway). Humanity worked hard to get here, doing many wonderful, and terrible, things along the way. 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? I don't know. What I can say with confidence, however, is that reconciling what we *know* with what we *feel* may well be the greatest challenge we face in the Age of Consequences.