

# A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

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## Chapter 23 A View From Europe

*Thursday, September 2<sup>nd</sup>. 6pm or so.*

In the air over Lake Michigan, sitting next to Sterling on a flight to Rome. Gen and Olivia sit directly in front of us. A bad Hollywood movie is playing overhead, and Sterling has just consumed two packages of salty snacks despite his announcement that they “didn’t taste very good.” In other words, we’re on our way. A year in the planning, the four of us are finally headed to Europe. Our excuse is our upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> birthdays, but toss in Gen’s bout with cancer, fast-growing kids (Sterling and Olivia are 11-year old twins), office stress, a marathon of reading and writing, and the Future Fatigue I’ve been experiencing lately and you have a recipe for a serious vacation.

Of course, it won’t be a *real* vacation, at least not the swing-in-the-hammock variety. That’s not my style, as Gen knows all too well. Not only have I planned an ambitious itinerary that will carry us from Rome to Paris in sixteen days, with a lot of ruins and castles in between, but I’ve given myself the extra chore of contemplating what it means to leave my forties behind. I need to downshift gears professionally somehow, though I’m not sure what that means. Maybe as I cross the magical ‘fifty’ threshold it will all suddenly become clear. We’re supposed to get wiser as we get older, right? Hopefully, Europe will help by giving me some perspective. In any case, the prospect of celebrating my birthday in Venice, just a few steps away from the Rialto Bridge, is also really cool.

For a while, however, it wasn’t clear if we would actually be getting on an airplane. Gen and I toiled at our day jobs literally to the last hour, knowing that we would deliberately leave our laptops and cell phones at home. We intend to be old-fashioned tourists, as anachronistic as that makes us these days. We don’t even own an E-reader. The books we brought along are all printed on paper. This is a topic that Gen and I discuss a lot – the role of technology in our lives. Is it a force for Good or Evil? It’s not clear yet. What bothers me most is seeing people stare into their cell phone/laptop/iphone/blackberry while their husband/wife/child/lover/sibling/grandparent/co-worker/teammate/classmate is utterly ignored. You see this phenomenon everywhere, and it’s a bad sign for America. We’re losing our social interaction skills, with big consequences...but then, I see signs of our impending Decline and Fall all around us, probably because I’ve been reading too many books on Roman history lately.

But as I said, it’s time for a serious vacation.

*Sunday, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 6am.*

In a tiny breakfast nook, Imperial Inn B&B, Rome. We landed at Da Vinci airport at 9am on Friday, groggy and stiff after an uncomfortable (and for me mostly sleepless) flight from Chicago. We skipped the train into town, opting for a thrilling taxi ride to the B&B instead. That woke us up, if only momentarily. Arriving at our destination, we were somewhat surprised to

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find that the ‘Imperial Inn’ resided in the corner of a 4<sup>th</sup> floor flat in a not very imperial building facing the busy Via Viminale. I chose it because of its proximity to Rome’s Termini train station, and because the on-line reviews were positive (and accurate, as it turns out). Fortunately, the building had a quaint elevator that the kids loved and the ‘Inn’ itself provided us with a room that featured two amenities instantly admired by the adults: a ceiling fan and sound-proof windows. Rome is hot and noisy, as well as very large and overwhelming. We couldn’t wait to go exploring.

But not yet – everyone drooped from the long flight. Hunger ruled, so we hunted for a pizzeria, hoping to give our blood sugar levels a jolt. We found one around the corner, but the kids drooped all over their chairs, so we made quick, unauthorized decisions about pizza toppings. Fifty Euros later, we were ready for a nap. Two hours later, we forced ourselves out of our beds and into the nearby subway, which took us directly to the ruin of the old Roman Colosseum, in the heart of the ancient city. It was time to get this trip officially started.

Walking out of the dark subway station, we were awestruck by what we saw. The 2000-year old Colosseum loomed, beautiful and terrifying all at the same time. We stopped dead in our tracks. Not only are Gen and I Americans, we are westerners, having emigrated to Albuquerque and Phoenix respectively as children, which means we grew up thinking that if something was built sixty years ago it was *old*. If an event took place before 1900, it was *ancient* history. Our attitude changed after we became archaeologists and our time horizon shifted backward by centuries, which helped us put the post-World War II development of the Southwest in perspective, including the historical anomalies called Albuquerque and Phoenix. Boom-and-bust, we came to see, were part of the cycle of things. But in Rome, we knew right away that our time horizon didn’t go back far enough. To be confronted with a structure that was 2000 years old and five stories high was, well, a thrill.

Crossing the street, we entered the Colosseum briskly, thanks to a pass, and began to explore the structure, which had filled with the lovely orange light of late afternoon. It reminded us of a modern football stadium, down to the numbered entrances and bleacher seats (we imagined a Roman ticket: section XV, row XXIII, seat IV). It felt familiar and comfortable, at least until we began to consider the whole bloody gladiator thing. This was no college gridiron field, of course. This was a killing ground, where many, many people died grisly deaths to the cheers of spectators. It was a chilling thought. Climbing a stairway, I recalled one of the videos Sterling and I watched before the trip, in which an English-accented narrator, after a particularly nasty episode of Roman military ruthlessness, said matter-of-factly: “The ancient Romans were not nice people.”

Indeed, the Roman civilization poses a challenge to modern-day admirers, especially eleven-year old ones. On the one hand, *what* Rome accomplished in its nearly 1000-year run is nothing short of stunning, particularly its engineering feats and its countless victories on the battlefield. But those were just the headlines, what’s always amazed me was Rome’s ability to govern its far-flung empire as efficiently and peacefully for as long as it did. Sure, there were the occasional uprisings, and those pesky barbarians kept things hot on the frontiers for centuries, but in the main the empire went calmly about its business. As an archaeologist, I knew this was a

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substantial achievement. Take Alexander the Great's empire, for example, which dissolved within one generation, or the vast Mongol empire, which faded away within two centuries of Genghis Khan's death. Either the Romans were really good at governing, really lucky, or really ruthless. I suspect it was a combination of all three, with "not nice" part playing a major role.

This brings me to the other hand: *how* Rome accomplished its indelible mark on world history. Much of it is a shocker for us moderns. Take the empire's heavy use of slavery, for instance, or the gladiator business, or the army's appalling practice of 'decimation' in which a Roman commander enforced discipline by ordering every tenth soldier to be beaten to death by his fellow legionnaires. Slavery, however, is the tough one. Try explaining to your child why the Romans bought and sold human beings like cattle and treated them like dogs, especially when you learn, as we did, that one in four residents of the ancient city were slaves. That's a lot of 'not nice' going on. Then there's the level of carnage that took place in the Colosseum itself. Olivia was very upset to learn that 11,000 wild animals were slaughtered during one lengthy festival simply to satisfy the bloodlust of the crowd. *11,000 animals!* Try making sense of that to a young girl whose favorite animal is a wild wolf. You can't.

For myself, the end-of-the-republic-start-of-the-monarchy thing that took place after five hundred years of republican rule is difficult to abide. One can't simply blame Julius Caesar either. Roman politics had become hopelessly gridlocked by the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., with the Senate blocking (sometimes violently) attempts at substantive reform. Elites and special interests dominated both politics and the economy while discontent among the plebeians in the streets spread riotously. The future looked very uncertain and tension rippled through every layer of Roman society. Eventually, civil war broke out, wracking the empire convulsively for a generation – and leading directly to the establishment of a hereditary emperor as a revolutionary form of government. Yikes!

I know the ancient Rome/modern America comparison is a cliché these days. But that's the thing about clichés – they have a ring of truth or they wouldn't be clichés. As we wandered around the Colosseum, for example, awed by the way its mammoth blocks fit perfectly together and knowing that it was all accomplished by ropes, wooden lifts, and (slave) labor, I couldn't help but wonder about an analogy with our modern faith in technology. We have our own Colosseums, of course, in all shapes and sizes, built primarily by the slave labor of fossil fuel. We keep building more and bigger Colosseums too, heedless of the consequences, assuming that our ingenuity will overcome all obstacles, as the Romans undoubtedly believed as well. Unfortunately, technology hasn't helped us overcome the political gridlock in Washington, D.C. or the high unemployment rate in America today. Is civil unrest in our future as well? No one knows. What I do know is that these thoughts were too heavy for the first day of a vacation. When the Colosseum closed, we headed for pasta and dessert.

We didn't stir from our beds until nine the next morning, which meant we had only one hour to get dressed and get across town to keep a ten o'clock appointment at the Vatican. We made it with a forced march from the subway station, slipping past the long line at the museum's entrance with another pass, only to be engulfed by a giant flood of humanity. We ebbed and flowed for the next five hours, frequently eddying in fascinating pools of Greek and Etruscan

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artifacts. A pleasant side channel brought us face-to-face with the famous statue of Emperor Augustus, located in a gilded hall. This was worth the visit alone. But then we had to swim upstream against a tide of fellow tourists, flanked by busts of bare-chested Greek gods and Roman patricii.

Exhausted, we decided to step out of the stream for a while, settling down at a small outdoor cafeteria at the head of a great lawn. As we sipped much-desired but too-tiny cups of coffee (no 32-ounce ‘big joes’ in Italy) and the kids drank sodas while eyeing the fruit cups suspiciously, a thought struck me: we were in *Rome!* It wasn’t a daydream (or a video), like it felt the evening before. It was the real thing (*wow*), down to the obnoxious cigarette smoke drifting past us and the rapid-fire way the natives talked. Here we were, drinking cappuccinos at the *Vatican!* How cool was that? (*very*) It was hard to believe, so I took a long look at the azure sky, the green grass and the smog-stained architecture around us. It would all be over too soon, I knew.

Plunging back into the river of humanity again, we were soon swept into the Sistine Chapel, which has been at the top of my To Do list for a long time. Wriggling into a space on a bench along a wall, we sat for quite a while, staring. I’m not much of an art history student, but it was easy to understand how Michelangelo’s work there influenced artists, and others, the world over. And that setting! No wonder a Pope fell to his knees in front of the Last Judgment (a guilty conscience?) when it was unveiled for the first time.

Exiting, we took a peek inside St. Peter’s basilica before settling down for panini sandwiches near a taxi stand in the bright sunlight. The hot air felt good on our faces after the staleness of the museum. What next? The kids were united: the old Roman Forum, ground zero for the Empire. Hot-footing it on the subway like locals, we arrived at the ruins a short time later. Unfortunately, the Forum is a confusing place, even with audio guides (which we ditched). But if it was difficult to correlate centuries of history with the stubby walls and columns in front of us, that was alright. It was enough to simply be there – in the heart of the 1000-year old Roman civilization, the center of the known universe at the time. While we couldn’t visualize Roman senators in their togas walking around very easily, it was enough to know they stood on these very same stones and passed under these very same arches.

Eventually, we climbed the famous Palatine Hill, home to Cicero, Caesar, Augustus and legions of other ghosts. Standing at an overlook, we watched the sun set on the Roman empire, ignoring the plane passing overhead and cars honking in the distance. Then a whistle blew nearby and we were unceremoniously escorted from the park by a guard, exiting via Titus’ magnificent arch. Suddenly, we were back in 2010 AD. We pulled our thoughts together near a cluster of souvenir stands. How were we? We were hungry. So, we took the subway back to the Termini and located a suitable restaurant nearby, ordering pizza and pasta (again) while soaking up the night’s soft embrace. It had been a very good day.

*Thursday, September 9<sup>th</sup>, 6am.*

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In the breakfast room, Hotel Caneva, Venice. I'm sipping a cappuccino from a machine and enjoying the meditative quiet of a Venetian morning. It's a big contrast with yesterday, which dawned with a spectacular rainstorm. Thunder boomed every thirty seconds or so and rain fell in sheets. It was a portentous start to one's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I thought. Actually, it was the second rainy day in a row, which is unusual for this time of year a hotel clerk told me. I had gone downstairs to use a phone and saw that the rain had caused the adjacent canal to rise and flood the lobby. Wooden planks had been placed from the stairs to the dry part so guests could leave without getting their shoes wet. When I queried the clerk, he shook his head. "Very unusual," he said. "Usually in winter, not now." A quick flash of climate change anxiety crossed my mind. Bigger and more frequent storms are an early sign of global warming, climatologists have been warning us. But then I thought "Wait! I'm in Venice! I'm not going to think about that!"

We couldn't help, however, thinking about America. Over supper last night, Gen and I did a quick comparison between the Old World and the New, and on many scores America didn't fare so well. Take toilets. Here, you have two choices when you flush: small and medium. In America, you mostly have only one choice: large. That pretty much describes the difference between the two Worlds. In Italy, people respect limits to their lives – street widths, room sizes, meal portions, the size of cars, the size of people. In America, limits are treated with contempt. Look at our economy, which operates on the idea that we have unlimited natural resources at our disposal. This creates, in turn, an almost messianic belief among Americans in limitless growth. Boundaries to our appetites? That's un-American! It's contrary to our history, culture, and our uncritical faith in technology. We formed as a nation on a continent that was practically boundless – and it shows, in our rejection of economic restraint, our arrogance, and our waistlines. Prudence is not part of our national DNA.

This is one reason why Italy was such a pleasant surprise when Gen and I visited nearly two years ago as delegates to the international Slow Food gathering in Turin. We took the opportunity to visit Venice and Tuscany as well and were amazed by what we saw including the way Italians accepted limits to their lives (except for restrictions on their driving habits). We assumed Italians learned their lessons the hard way through centuries of conflict and privation. Americans suffered their share of struggle and want too over the years, but something changed after World War II, when nearly all shackles to our behavior, economic or otherwise, suddenly were cast off. Now, the chickens are coming home to roost. There is an urgent need to respect limits today before it's too late. However, it's almost impossible to imagine how Americans will begin to do that until we're forced to.

Gen and I discussed another difference between Italy and America that we noticed back in 2008: not nearly as many people here are mesmerized by their cell phones and laptops. Back home, it seems as if every third person you see is in a physical embrace with an electronic gizmo of some sort. Not so Italy, though our sample size was admittedly small. Gen thinks it's because they value conversation so highly in Europe, especially animated conversation. Culturally, Italians seem to rate "face time" more highly than Americans, which might also explain why they smoke so many cigarettes. It's part of the whole 'social' thing that goes on here, which includes lengthy meals, a different (smaller) sense of physical space, and an emphasis on good-looking clothes. I

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don't know. What I can say with certainty is that cigarettes stink. Sterling holds his nose when smoke from one drifts over from an adjoining table. I try to be more discreet.

We arrived in Venice on Monday afternoon without any trouble. The weather was clear, the trains ran on time, and the long walk from the station to the hotel, located near the Rialto Bridge, was, well, noisy. Our wheeled luggage clacked up and down the steps of every bridge, echoing off walls of the houses, giving the underpopulated city an extra air of ghostliness. After depositing our bags in the austere but perfectly acceptable (and perfectly located) hotel, we headed down to piazza San Marco, following a route that I recalled from our previous visit.

Gen and I quickly realized that Venice isn't really for kids, or at least doesn't hold the charms for them that Rome did. Venice is for lovers, of course, as well as for those who appreciate it being a "puddle of elegant decay" as the author of our guidebook put it. But it's not really for children. The stores caught their attention, as did the pigeons, and they liked the labyrinthine feel of the city, which Sterling took as a challenge ("This way Papa, I think."). But the subtle qualities of the city, especially the pleasures of texture that abound in Venice, were largely lost on them. That's ok – Venice has an elusive core that is hard even for adults to grasp. Unlike Rome, it was an empire of trade, not conquest, which gives its history a slippery feel.

Maybe it doesn't matter. When you walk into San Marco square, it's the pleasure of texture that impresses. What a place! Even on a second visit, the space and the architecture and the light conspire to overwhelm the most jaded heart. It's a performance space too: the vendors, the dueling musical ensembles in front of elegant hotels, the swarm of tourists from every corner of the globe, and the countless pigeons. Sterling and Olivia began chasing the hapless birds through gaps in the crowds almost immediately. It was a timeless and endearing sight, I have to admit. I was proud to give them this opportunity – to chase pigeons around San Marco square. I think my birthday present came a few days early.

There was one disquieting moment. Leaving the square, we turned left at the waterfront and walked a short distance to the famous Bridge of Sighs, so-called because it connected the Doge's palace (the seat of Venice's government during its heyday) to the prison and thus provided convicted felons a last glimpse of the sky before a sunless imprisonment. Today, the Bridge is a European icon, which might explain why it was wrapped in a splashy advertisement for a jewelry company when we saw it. We were stunned. Later, we learned that the city government had "sold" the space in order to raise funds to maintain Venice's vast, and deteriorating, cultural heritage. We also learned that the decision was highly controversial among Venetians. I bet. On the one hand, the decision made sense – America has its share of underfunded heritage projects as well. But on the other – would it be ok if the National Park Service sold wall space at the Lincoln Memorial to a corporation for an ad? *No*. Hopefully, Venice won't start selling ad space all over town.

The morning of our second day in Venice was drizzly, so the kids pulled out their homework. I went outside to look for a copy of the *International Herald Tribune* and ended up taking a long walk instead. It was the last day of my forties and the drizzle fit my mood. What should I do with my fifties? I have been tilting at various windmills for twenty years and now need to slow down. Being fifty means you are young enough to *want* to keep tilting at windmills even though your

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mind says you ought to know better. At forty, one can afford to be rather indiscriminate with one's battles, but now one must pick them more carefully. One needs to stop and smell the roses more often as well, especially as your children cross their own thresholds. That's easier said than done, of course, but that's why you visit places like Venice – to look backward and forward simultaneously.

It's not just about turning fifty. For the past few years I've been feeling rather bluesy about the Future. My life will likely span a tremendous transition in American history, from the post-World War II high of prosperity, growth and unbounded optimism to an era of high anxiety as various chickens come home to roost, as I said. No one knows what is coming precisely, of course, but enough smart people have expressed enough concern to warrant a serious case of Deep Apprehension. Take climate change. It's already started and Venice is literally on the front lines. That's one of the reasons we're here. Though Gen and I probably won't live long enough to see climate change bite Venice hard, Sterling and Olivia will. We wanted them to see the city before that happened, though they can't appreciate it very much yet, obviously.

What can I do to help the Future? My morning meander didn't reveal any answers, though it brought me to the top of the Rialto Bridge, which provides one of the most meditative vistas in all of Venice. The drizzle had abated somewhat, so I stood at the bridge's apex for a long while, soaking in the elegant decay all around me. Venice has endured a great deal of trial-and-tribulation in its eventful 1200-year history and will likely prove resilient well into the Future. I hope so anyway.

On Wednesday, after the morning sturm-und-drang show, we headed to Murano Island, home to Venice's famous glassmaking factories. We spent five hours there strolling slowly, peering into shops and watching the islanders go about their daily lives. We ate alongside the main canal, watching the bus boats zip past. Later, we detoured down a side street, past luminous household gardens, to a park where local kids kicked a soccer ball while mothers pushed infants in strollers. Later, we stopped at a vacant field to study the grasses for a moment (causing a lot of foot-shifting by Sterling and Olivia), before heading 'home' to Venice. It was a good visit. Murano felt more like a 'real' town than its busy sister city. It was easy to imagine living there. Perhaps some day!

Late in the afternoon, we woke the kids from a well-deserved nap and headed to a restaurant next to the Rialto Bridge which I had just scoped out. Incredibly, an empty table awaited us at the closest possible spot to the Bridge itself. It felt like the supper gods were smiling on us. This was my dream: to celebrate my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday with my family next to the Rialto Bridge. It got better. An outstanding meal arrived (the kids are still talking about it). Gen ordered salted codfish with polenta, Olivia had pasta, I had pasta with seafood, and Sterling, who was indecisive for a change, picked two appetizers. Everything was delicious. We had wine, and salad, and dessert. We talked and laughed and toasted. It was perfect. The night air was still and warm, the gondolas plied the Grand Canal quietly, dodging the water buses as the sky slipped slowly from dark blue to black. I couldn't have asked for a better birthday present.

I wished it would never end.

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*Sunday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, 6am.*

In the dining room of the Home Sweet Home B&B, Nice, France. I'm drinking too much coffee. Our hosts pointed out the American-style coffee pot when we arrived, so I'm in a kind of seventh-heaven, which could be a dangerous thing journal-wise. In fact, while I'm on a caffeine high, I'd like to discuss a news headline.

Yesterday was the anniversary of the World Trade Center bombings in New York City, and the run-up this week, as reported in the *International Herald*, has been dominated by an incredible story. A fundamentalist minister in south Florida, whose "church" has only fifty members, created an international incident by threatening to burn a stack of Korans on 9/11 in protest of radical Islam. This would have been a non-story fifteen years ago, but today, thanks to the Internet, a voracious news cycle and a worldwide case of hyper-anxiety about anything connected to Islam, it became a crisis of alarming proportions. Presidents, generals, religious leaders, and pundits of all shapes and sizes weighed in, worried that video images of Korans going up in flames would incite the very extremism that the preacher said he was trying to protest. Many said it would cost Americans overseas their lives, especially those in the military. For a while their words fell on deaf ears. The publicity-mad preacher remained defiant in spite of (or because of) the condemnation he received. Finally, he relented and yesterday passed quietly without a conflagration anywhere, thankfully.

The entire episode says a lot about the world we live in, from our intense electronic interconnectedness to our hyper-sensitivities. No wonder it feels like we can't get anything accomplished anymore, not when every opinion or outrage, much less actual political or social reform, is instantly broadcast around the globe, provoking a cascade of reaction and resistance. Scrutiny, debate, analysis, finger-pointing, knee-jerks and endless opining are the primary products of our economy today. An obscure, nutty preacher plans to burn Korans!! Quick, let's give him a global platform, denounce him, and then talk about the whole thing *endlessly*. It's insane.

Frankly, the episode made me feel a bit embarrassed to be an American. Europeans must be shaking their heads in disbelief. Then there's the whole Tea Party/Sarah Palin/right-wing libertarian political resurgence taking place back home. You have to wonder what sensible Europeans make of a nation that takes someone like Sarah Palin seriously as a potential presidential candidate? Hell, I don't know what to make of it. We elect brainy, dispassionate Barack Obama to the presidency and follow that, possibly, with a clueless reactionary like Palin? Yikes! America is a fabulous, inspiring, and wonderfully diverse nation and I'm very proud to be a native son, but its political system is in shambles. Its economy isn't in much better shape, and may not be shaping up again anytime soon. No one wants to admit that change is probably here to stay. We liked the 20<sup>th</sup> century – "America's century" – *a lot*. But the 21<sup>st</sup> century is upon us and now the question is how will we respond? If current events are any indication, the answer looks like: not well. If the economy goes further south in the next year or two, then we *could*

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*have* President Palin, as incredible as that sounds. And I bet more than one stack of Korans will go up in smoke as a result.

But, that's just the coffee talking.

The purpose of coming to Nice was to swim in the Mediterranean Sea and to relax. Unfortunately, getting here created exactly the opposite effect. It took twelve hours to arrive from Venice via four trains, instead of the scheduled three, putting us into the station at midnight. We were supposed to arrive at nine, but someone threw themselves in front of our train between Genoa and Savona, in Italy, apparently ending their life. No one told us the cause of the delay, however, so we sat patiently in our cabin, playing chess and reading books. Eventually, I ventured outside where I found a nice English-speaking Italian who related the unfortunate news. He seemed unperturbed. When I asked him what was taking so long, he shrugged. "Probably the paperwork," he replied.

A quick word about chess. We spied a wonderful set in a Venetian shop – ancient Greeks vs. Romans – that Sterling admired very much. We decided it was an early birthday present and purchased it. Nonstop chess playing followed as we worked our way across northern Italy, Sterling vs. Olivia mostly. Watching them, I thought "Kids don't need electronic devices. All they need is a piece of wood and a few figurines." Our children don't own any electronic distractions, which mean they aren't lost in a 2-D fog, detached from the 3-D universe around them. And Europe is extraordinarily 3-D. I can't imagine bringing a child here and have them spend half their time staring into a screen. It would be an outrage – for the kid. To hand a child an electronic gizmo today is *not* to prepare them for a virtual workplace, as we are so often told, but to intentionally exclude them from the stress and complexities and joys of living in a 3-D world. I know that many experts disagree with that statement, arguing that navigating a complex 2-D universe actually prepares a child for the real world, but I just don't believe it. We're a social species that evolved to communicate face-to-face, not screen to screen. We need a real community, not a virtual one, to thrive.

But that's probably the coffee talking again.

After our late-night arrival, we slept until nearly noon on Friday, though I rose before the others and went for a walk down to the beach. Back at the hotel, I stirred the family to life and after a lot of sitting and staring they managed to get into their bathing suits. Gen and I knew there would be serious food issues coming, so aimed for a pizza-serving restaurant on the waterfront, where we were dazzled by the bright sun and the large quantities of beach-goers. I knew that Nice was a charter member of the Cote d'Azur, sandwiched between the exclusive enclave of Monaco to the south and the ritzy Cannes to the north, site of the famous film festival. I didn't know that Nice is France's fifth largest city, a product of the sea, the soft climate, and the lovely light.

After lunch, we walked the short distance from the restaurant to the public beach, which consisted of a 200 x 300-yard stretch of pebbles, dotted with Europeans in various degrees of undress. We threw our towels down in the bright sunlight and immediately headed for the water, which was an amazing shade of bright blue. The Mediterranean! The pebbles hurt our feet and

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the waves were surprisingly puny, but it didn't matter – we were splashing around in one of the world's great bodies of water. The day was warm, the water lovely, and the color of the sea harmonized perfectly with the quality of the sunlight.

We swam and hobbled over the pebbles until we felt hungry again. After a visit to our room at the B&B and a rapid sequence of showers (the kids are still adjusting to the un-American idea of shared bathrooms), we walked down to the 'restaurant row' in the busy heart of Nice. Our choices blurred together, so we eeny-meenied, selecting an outdoor eatery more for its people-watching possibilities than its menu (though the presence of pasta or pizza was a requirement). It was a lovely, warm evening and the entire city seemed to be out and about. Gen and I ordered beers and toasted the balmy Mediterranean climate. We talked about how much we liked all the little details of Europe: the little face-fountains pouring water, the roundabouts in the roads, the lack of garish corporate advertising (other than in Venice), the conveniently located pharmacies, the 1 Euro and 2 Euro coins, the bus stops way out in the countryside, and the fascinating blend of old and new at all levels, from castles on hilltops to the way water runs into ancient drains in a street. Everything has a sense of style too, including the natives themselves, which makes people-watching – one of my favorite activities – doubly fun.

On Saturday, we took a city bus up to the Roman ruin of Cemenelum, which occupies a hilltop a few miles inland. It is located within a picturesque park that also contains a museum dedicated to the painter Henri Matisse. Once off the bus, however, we headed straight for food. Despite staying in B&Bs, the kids don't eat much for breakfast. Olivia mostly stares at the French bread and Sterling only eats the fluffy interior. It doesn't get much easier at lunchtime. Neither child likes cheese that "tastes funny" and Olivia won't consider any meat that isn't ham or turkey. They will eat gelato with gusto, however, though we had to practically beg them to try it the first time.

After fortifying ourselves with panini sandwiches and sodas, we toured the museum at Cemenelum before strolling through the Roman baths, where Sterling and I lingered for such a long time, examining the architecture, that a guard drifted out to check on us. Gen always takes longer in museums than we do, so the kids and I wandered back out to the adjacent park and settled down to watch an intense game of boules, which involved players tossing or rolling heavy balls at a small target. It was sort of like curling only without the ice. We tried to figure out the rules, but didn't make much progress. Only one rule was clear: the players were required to argue among themselves vigorously after nearly every toss.

Sitting with the kids under the trees, watching the natives play a game that was probably as old as the nearby Roman ruin, I couldn't help but ponder the Future again. On the one hand, not much has changed in centuries: the gently swaying trees, the camaraderie of friends playing a game together outside, kids leaning against their father soaking up the sights, old buildings nearby, the sound of traffic in the street. It felt completely eternal. But on the other hand, nothing is standing still these days – and may in fact be picking up speed. It is easy and comforting to look backward two thousand years from here, but what will the next twenty bring? Not good news either here in Europe or at home.

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But that's probably the coffee talking again.

*Tuesday, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 7am.* Hotel dining room, Chateaux Beynac, in the Dordogne region of southwestern France. I just finished a lovely continental breakfast after a solitary predawn walk around the small medieval village of Beynac. We arrived late yesterday, after a wrong turn in nearby Sarlat, and immediately fell in love with the town, impressed by the huge castle that rises directly above the hotel and the soft river that flows at its foot. After checking in, we climbed a very narrow and steep street to the castle itself, huffing and puffing most of the way. We were rewarded with an amazing sight: a setting sun over rich farmlands embracing the tranquil Dordogne River...and another castle on the horizon! It was a balm to our weary tourist souls.

That's because it had been a long two days getting here.

It began when our B&B host in Nice unexpectedly insisted that we pay for our stay with cash, which nearly cleaned us out of Euros. Then, despite picking up our rental car a day early, we got a late start leaving town, which we compounded by driving into Cannes for a quick look-see. There was nothing quick about Cannes. Next came toll road *hell*. Our faithful guidebook didn't warn us about toll roads, and as a resident of the toll-less American West, I had no clue what to do when I pulled up to the first booth, other than panic. At the next booth, I inadvertently put the wrong ticket into an automated machine, which made it angry. I tried a credit card next, but it rejected it as American, probably out of spite. I didn't have enough coins either, so we decided to back up. Gen jumped out of the car and asked four miffed drivers to back up, employing her best college French. It was a mess. We navigated the next toll booth without creating a crisis, but then we took the wrong fork in the highway, causing the attendant at the subsequent booth to squint at us with exasperation. It would have been comical if it hadn't been so stressful. In fact, it became so nerve-wracking that the sight of the word "peant" ("you must pay!") on a highway sign caused my heart to beat wildly.

Eventually, the toll gods decided to stop tormenting us and we made it to the Pont du Gard before closing time. This is the famous fragment a 2000-year old Roman aqueduct that carried water from the mountains to ancient the city of Nimes. It stretches spectacularly across the Gard River, three stories high and riddled with beautiful roman arches. We arrived just in time to see the structure ablaze with fiery sunlight. I was awestruck by the aqueduct's perfect blend of form and function. It's an engineering marvel, of course, especially for its day, but it is also intensely beautiful, with or without the fiery sunset. "What an empire!," I quipped to the kids as we strolled along the structure's base. I tried to think of something comparable in America and the Golden Gate Bridge came immediately to mind, which was also constructed in an era where form and function meant something.

I tried to think of something more recent, but failed. Growing up in Phoenix meant that my idea of form + function was a shopping mall. Or a housing subdivision. There was literally nothing beautiful to look at, other than the transplanted ocotillo and saguaro cacti that festooned the front yards of new homes and office complexes. The sprawling golf courses were attractive, but even as a teenager I knew that they were an aberration in a hot, dry desert. In Phoenix, it felt like form gave up the fight to function everywhere I went, or else took on a thin façade, like the faux brickwork inevitably added to a building to make it look like it wasn't constructed out of

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plywood. Later, as I traveled I saw it was much the same across the nation. I accepted this as normal, but our experience in Europe tells me that it isn't 'normal' at all.

After a too-brief visit to the aqueduct, we hustled back to our car. We still had a long way to go and were eager to get to our next destination – the medieval city of Carcassonne – though the prospect of additional toll booths along the way made my hands sweat. But the toll gods smiled on us. At the last booth, late at night on the edge of the Carcassonne, we literally used up our last Euros. If the toll had been one Euro more...well, I don't know where we would have slept. That's because as we pulled up to our overnight destination, an old abbey, the gate was literally being closed for the evening. Two minutes later and we would have been searching the city for a place to lay our weary heads.

We would have missed a great place to stay too. The converted abbey's rooms were remodeled, clean and austere. We loved it. The kids had a bunk bed at one end of the tiny room, while our bed resided at the other, a few feet away. In between was a modular bathroom the size of a small closet. In the morning, we looked out the window and saw the roof and courtyard of an ancient abbey, church and all. As history buffs, this was all really, *really* cool. When I made the reservation, I wasn't sure what we getting, other than a cheap room. But the abbey was wonderful, though largely empty. We shared a simple breakfast of croissants and jam with one other couple in a roomy dining hall designed for rows of nuns. Our guidebook said the abbey was a favorite stop for school groups today, but on this particular Monday morning the abbey echoed with our solitary footsteps.

Soon, our feet were carrying us to the old city. Scouting before dawn, I had slipped out of the abbey and walked the short distance to the moated entrance of Carcassonne, which is a compact medieval castle/city surrounded by tall walls and filled with tourist shoppes. Dodging a steady stream of decidedly unmedieval delivery trucks, I wandered through the dampness, marveling at the moody architecture. Carcassonne was saved from oblivion by a mayor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who had it restored to its former architectural glory just in time for the invention of the *vacation*. He did an admirable job – the place is a feast for the senses, as well as a hulking testament to the Age of Chivalry. As we prowled around the fortress after breakfast we gawked at the huge scale of everything. The Romans were here first, of course – we could pick out their distinctive brickwork by now.

Taking a long walk around the outer ring of walls, I marveled at the apparent lack of concern for personal safety on the part of the French. Frequently, nothing stood between us and a twenty foot fall. In America, we would have been fenced in by handrails or ropes, especially if it were a state or national park (Gen and I are former employees of the National Park Service). "What would Carcassonne would be like if the Park Service were in charge," I asked her as we climbed a steep set of stairs. "We'd be on the ground looking up," she replied, "from way over there probably." Looking in the guidebook, I read a confirmation that the French don't worry about safety as much as we do. You can go largely where you want, it said. It is an interesting contrast. Sometimes it feels like you have more 'protection' in America but less freedom. 9/11 has a lot to do with this, of course, but America also has a way of taking things two or three steps too far, such as restricting certain freedoms in the name of security or safety.

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America is a funny place, I thought as we explored. The intense anti-French thing that happened in the wake of 9/11 (remember “Freedom fries”?) was embarrassing. Why, all of a sudden, were we making faces at an old and trusted ally like France? It felt like playground behavior. For a nation as sophisticated and technologically-advanced as ours, we sometimes act in immature ways. Like threatening to burn a stack of Korans. This isn’t to say that Europe doesn’t have its share of right-wing nuttiness or social immaturity, because it certainly does, but the scale feels different. Things feel bigger in America, including our immaturity. I’m a citizen of the greatest nation on earth, and proud to be so, but I worry a lot about its Future. We seem to be sort of ‘reality-challenged’ these days, unwilling or unable to confront rising troubles. Instead, we’ve developed a bad habit of kicking hard decisions down the road, saying, in effect, that future generations will have to figure them out. Climate change? Sorry kids, that’s your problem. The national debt? Ditto. Reform Social Security and Medicaid to keep them solvent? Good luck with that too. After all, we can’t tie the hands of our economy, can we? Oh, here’s the bill, by the way. See ya!

Perhaps I’m being too harsh.

Speaking of bills, at the approach of the noon hour I directed us toward lunch in a pint-sized piazza in the center of town that I had discovered during my predawn ramble. It was now full of tables, waiters, dappled trees and eaters. Three different restaurants shared the open space, which made for a fascinating dance of food, spirits, foreign languages, buzzing waiters, clinking glasses, and gorgeous light falling from the heavens. It was a feast for all the senses, the eyes especially. If Monet or Renoir were alive today, I bet they would have set up an easel in a corner of this piazza to paint their impressions. Later, we hit the gift shoppes and then elbowed our way back through the crowds to the drawbridge where we lingered, soaking up the sights one last time. Tourism is a lot like the lunch, I thought to myself. You eat a great meal in an exotic location, enjoying every bite, and then suddenly it’s over. The glow fades, leaving you to ask “I wonder what the other dishes on the menu taste like?” You vow to return to find out, snap a photograph and move on.

And hope that the toll gods keep smiling.

*Thursday, September 16<sup>th</sup>, 6am.* Back in the Chateaux Beynac dining room, drinking coffee. We are seriously hooked by Beynac and the Dordogne. We’re due to pack up today and drive to Paris, but I’m not ready to leave. That’s because I found a slice of *Agraria* here and it has set me to thinking.

It started with our hotel and the lovely little village that surrounds it. Sandwiched between the river and the castle, with the countryside only a short walk away, Beynac strikes me as almost ideal (except for the constant flow of truck traffic just outside the hotel’s front door). It’s a tourist town, to be sure, complete with art galleries and souvenir shoppes, but underneath the carefully maintained gloss is a real town that harmonizes perfectly with its surroundings. Take the ‘tabac’ shop just up the street, for example. Owned by a very nice older couple who were amused by our daily purchase of exactly-the-same sandwiches, it is small, tidy, well-worn and full of things we

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needed. Located on an attractive street that is small, tidy and well-worn, it has a ‘rightness’ of scale that contributes to a sense of ‘placeness’ that resonates throughout the village. Actually, we found this ‘placeness’ everywhere we went.

We found it on Tuesday as we canoed the Dordogne River. After a morning of homework, we were picked up by the canoe company and driven to Carsac where we were given two canoes and rather unceremoniously deposited on the river bank by an unsmiling employee. It was a gorgeous day, warm and still. Sterling and I stepped carefully into one canoe, Gen and Olivia into the other. We shoved off into the wide, glassy river, knowing it would be a memorable day. For the next five hours we paddled, drifted, dreamed, and oohed as we floated past limestone cliffs, old castles, farm fields, bridges, campgrounds, villages, and solitary houses. To call it an idyll would be an understatement, though the kids grew weary towards the end and Gen’s tender back began to hurt her from the exertion.

As we paddled, I thought: this area has it all – beauty, history, culture, farming, wilderness of a sort, fine food, civility and a deep-rootedness that is literally foreign to me. It was an *agrarian* vision – a harmony of land and culture. Wendell Berry calls agrarianism “another way to live and think” and contrasts it to the destructive industrial model of living and thinking that has dominated the world for the past half-century, especially in America. Agrarianism is “not so much a philosophy as a practice, an attitude, a loyalty and a passion,” writes Wendell, “all based in close connection with the land. It results in a sound local economy in which producers and consumers are neighbors and in which nature herself becomes the standard for work and production.” I had no idea, of course, if the agriculture we saw near Beynac was ‘sustainable’ or not, but it looked like it to my eyes. There certainly was a strong sense of harmony to the landscape. It definitely gave me the impression that we were drifting through a slice of *Agraria*.

This feeling was reinforced yesterday by a drive to nearby Lascaux and a tour of the famous cave paintings of wild bison, horses, deer, and aurochs (cattle) that have been recreated there (the original cave was closed in 1963 to protect the images from deterioration). Wherever we drove, we saw an enchanting mosaic of woodlands, small farmsteads, verdant grazing lands, picturesque villages, and healthy-looking riparian areas. We didn’t see any overgrazing, obvious signs of erosion, or anything that looked like a feedlot. Maybe we were looking in the wrong places, but I doubt it. The area reminded me of the Amish country I’ve visited in central Ohio, only without the horse-and-buggies. This wasn’t a coincidence – the Amish heartland is another slice of *Agraria*, a place where people have managed to live more-or-less harmoniously *with* the land, economically and ecologically, rather than against it.

There was an important difference, however, between the Amish country of central Ohio and the Dordogne region of southwestern France: humans have lived here for *thousands* of years, not merely hundreds.

This is one of the main lessons we learned from the 17,000-year old paintings at Lascaux. The cave’s presence suggests that humans have managed to occupy this area for a very long time *sustainably* – an observation that recalled the famous lament by the great American conservationist Aldo Leopold who said that the “oldest task in human history was how to live on

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a piece of land without ruining it.” Somehow, apparently, the residents of the Dordogne figured it out. How did they do it? Was it the soil? The rain? The area’s remoteness? The culture? All of the above? I knew that similar country had been ruined by hard use in other parts of the world. What was different here?

This is important because we live in an age where the issue of sustainability is becoming more and more critical, especially as the pace of ‘land ruination’ picks up due to population pressures, energy demands, and food shortages. It behooves us, therefore, to study examples of sustainability in action, rather than in theory. However, to many American conservationists the Dordogne may have little appeal. After all, there isn’t much wilderness left here; it’s all cultivated, to one degree or another, which is one reason why there are no wild bison, horses, or cattle around anymore. If it’s wildness you’re after, then rural France may not be the best place to look. But if it’s harmony you’re after, as Aldo Leopold was, then the Dordogne fits the bill.

And harmony is what I’m after.

I believe the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be dominated by the issue of human well-being (and in some places it has already begun). That sounds selfish of us, but if our ability to find food, fuel, fiber, water, and shelter becomes strained then 20<sup>th</sup>-century issues such as ‘wildness’ or endangered species protection will drop way down our ‘To Do’ list. And if the experts are right, especially on climate change, then human well-being may easily become our top priority. This is why it’s important to find slices of *Agraria*. We need its harmony along with its food. We need to understand why human settlement persists so well in some places while in other places – many other places – it has not. It’s not simply a matter of rain, soil, climate or other local factors; plenty of places with ample amounts of each have been ruined over time. The difference, I think, is culture – by which I mean our values, norms, and economic incentives. When they harmonize with the land, all flourishes. When they do not, trouble and despair follow.

This is the biggest lesson I learned on this trip: how our values shape our decisions. We can’t simply “make different decisions” in the future (i.e., employ different technology) in order to confront a crisis without confronting the value system that created the crisis in the first place. Whether it’s the brutality of empires, the pleasures of texture, lessons about limitations, questions of form and function, or the importance of placeness in our lives, the view from Europe suggests that Americans need to ask themselves hard questions about values before we get much further down the road. But will we? I don’t know, but I hope so.

In the meantime I can’t wait to come back.