

Why are people trying to kill me?

They are afraid.

The Vikings invaded England and France and the lives of the inhabitants changed forever. Centuries later the French and the English and we destroyed every nation we encountered in our march across North America. We didn't need much of an excuse to push them out of our way. After all, we needed the land and it was our manifest destiny to occupy the entire continent, or at least all of the arable land and the land that would support sheep and cattle and the land from which timber and fur could be harvested. The people living on the land simply were not important compared to our destiny and our needs.

We don't actually drive people like cattle from the good land to the barren anymore. Still, even now, we do not care how our pursuit of our needs and our destiny effects other people, and other people are starting to notice.

Some personal observations. In 1964 I lived in Germany. It was a clean, orderly, well-maintained country. Life centered largely in the immediate community. Most shopping could be done on foot. People traveled by trains that were almost always safe, clean, and on time. Many people rode bicycles. Every respectable city had a system of streetcars. And I don't remember seeing any billboards on the highways.

I do remember taking a bus tour from Germany into Italy, down as far south as Capri. I was impressed by many things, but I was saddened at the sight of American style billboards along the highways. I didn't want Italy to look like America.

In 1989 I went back to Germany on business. I found billboards, shopping centers, and discount warehouse stores with huge parking lots. Again, I was saddened. I didn't want Germany to look like America.

In the 1980's I did some work with an anthropologist who was dedicated to helping the native people of eastern Ecuador. We didn't drive them out of their forests, but the large oil companies did scar the forests with their roads, pollute the water with chemicals, and lure aboriginal people with promises of modern conveniences and high wages into temporary jobs that disappeared when the roads were built and the drilling done. The simplicity and the beauty of their culture is now gone and cannot be brought back. We needed the oil and I can't even remember the name of the aboriginal society.

Every day each and every one of us disrupts and destroys life around us, often without even knowing what we are doing. Maybe worms, bugs and spiders don't count for much, but we step on them, brush them aside, and kill them with our chemicals without much thought, often without any thought or any awareness at all. In fact, worms, bugs and spiders are ultimately essential to life on earth as we know it.

Every day we ask people to act as our agents across the globe. We count on our morning coffee from Kenya or Columbia. It helps us wake up enough to read our email on the monitor made in Malaysia or drive to work using oil from Saudi Arabia. But we aren't evil people. We pay for the coffee, the monitor, and the oil. Just like we paid for the road-building and drilling in Ecuador. We (almost) never put a gun to anyone's head to get what we want, but we also almost never think about how our needs end up changing other people around the world.

More important, we assume, or expect, that everyone in the world wants to be just like us. They don't. If you think about it, even we don't want to be like us. There are about twelve things we would like to be. Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent come to mind. Rich, fat, overworked, angry, burned out, tired, and sick are not on the list.

I wonder what a thoughtful man in the Middle East who values his relationships with his friends and his family thinks about us. I wonder what he would think of a married couple who would actually decide, after careful consideration, that they should live thousands of miles apart because of their need to succeed in their careers. Does he know what a career is? Does he care? Should we? I do believe that "From whom much has been given, much is expected," but when individual success is more important than family, friends, and community, it may be time to reconsider priorities. When people are willing to spend ten to twelve hours every day at work and in their cars driving to and from work (leaving only four or five waking hours a day for their personal and family needs) to maintain their lifestyles, it may be time to reconsider priorities.

We have a curious habit of assuming that people who do not like us are just envious of our lifestyle. They must feel "left out" of the global economy, according to one prominent black American. Doesn't everyone want to spend virtually every waking hour supporting and maintaining a two-thousand-square-foot house and at least one late-model car for each family member of driving age? Doesn't everyone want to watch American action movies in his family room instead of talking to his family?

If we believe that – if we do not acknowledge the right of peoples to respect and preserve their own cultures – we may soon accelerate the process of our ultimate destruction.

People who truly believe that we are evil, whether by intent or by cultural oblivion, have attacked us and we are going to strike back. If we march into the Muslim world knocking down fences and trampling crops like Sherman marching to the sea, shooting at anyone with an untrimmed beard, we will richly deserve whatever fate they eventually manage to wreak on us. It will be an inevitable chain reaction of attack, outrage, counterattack, and more outrage. Before we declare war we ought to be very clear on whom we are declaring war. In fact, we need to figure out how to make it crystal clear to everyone who has not been a party to mass murder that we are not at war with them. We need to figure out how to punish misguided religious heroes and zealots without angering their admirers. Perhaps we could do this by extending those legal rights and privileges we have granted ourselves to people who are far away and do not, on the surface, look, think

or act like us. If we believe in our Bill of Rights, then we believe in it. If we don't accord people we suspect of being or abetting these terrorists the same rights and protections that we would ourselves insist on, we reveal our true priorities and beliefs – the priorities and beliefs that wiped out the native Americans, reaped the benefits of slavery, and continue to push aside cultures and values that impede our drive for more possessions and more prosperity. For us.

Think how it must have felt to be a plains Indian watching the white man driving Indians from the east into reservations on the plains.

Think how it must have felt to be a Palestinian farmer one day and a homeless refugee the next, with no way to house or feed your family.

Think how it must feel to be a modest, conservative man seeing your children abandon your faith and your values for those of the west. And how painful it must be to look in their faces and see no respect for the person you have worked so hard and so long to become.

How can we look at that man and say he is just envious of our prosperity? We had better understand his feelings and make sure he knows we are at least trying to understand. Because if we keep on going on the way we are going he will fear and hate us and he will have reasons.