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an excerpt of

## *Sweet Reason, Global Swarming*

A half century ago Richard Wilbur's presciently ironic yet beautiful poem "Advice to a Prophet" addressed suggestions to a seer whose prophecies warn city after city of dire losses if environmental sanity is ignored. Already in the poem's opening stanza, however, he has grown "Mad-eyed from stating the obvious" and is begging his hearers "In God's name to have self-pity."

Alas, like Cassandra's foretelling Trojan doom, the prophet's wise counsel has apparently fallen on deaf ears, and the poem's tone implies that its own "advice" will fare no better. Feeling briefly clairvoyant myself, I now prophesy that except among a small percent of altruists environmental appeals to reason and enlightened self-interest will have little effect.

All the same, the persuasive good sense and exemplarily well-chosen detail of Scott Russell Sanders' argument in his essay "Simplicity and Sanity" carries me along like Plato's discoursing on the Good. After all, what should be more compelling than the health of our planet?

Sadly, however, the history of Homo sapiens reveals that voices as reasonable as that of "Simplicity and Sanity" evoke lasting admiration but little action. In all history, no great movement has ever been driven by intellect. Only emotion can do that, and at one juncture Sanders expresses just such a misgiving: "If we human beings were as wise as we claim to be . . . we would do voluntarily what nature will otherwise force on us." The sentence's first tiny word recalls Touchstone's shrewdly noting in *As You Like It*, "Much virtue in if."

On an April evening in 2007 I loitered in the foyer of my university's planetarium while awaiting the start of a show on what arguably has been the most brilliantly successful mission in NASA's history since humans landed on the lunar surface. Already the Cassini-Huygens vehicle had been orbiting Saturn for some weeks, and I was eager to see the results. Lest the post-show

discussion go into overtime, my vatic powers suggested a quick visit to the men's room. There, an astronomer at the urinal next to mine excitedly told me of possible life on the Saturnian moon Titan. "Wait'll you see the photos," he said. "They'll knock your socks off."

"Hm-m-m," I replied.

Despite my lifelong fascination with astronomy and cosmology, I deplore spending millions on quests for life elsewhere when—given our finite resources—Earth's plight should be our number one priority. Venus, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter, and Pluto won't wander off, but countless terrestrial species have done so, disappearing forever, and *Homo sapiens* may join them. How rational is it, therefore, to blow incredible wampum looking for life on other planets while blighting life on this one? We know our Earth so ill that we're totally ignorant as to what the daily loss of species after species may cost us.

Rather than enthuse over some hypothetical critter under the surface of Titan, I therefore thought, "Piss on it!" and did. Figuratively speaking. . . .

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Not to pussyfoot, I declare that any religion whose creed is to breed qualifies, in the etymological sense of the word, as perfectly insane. So does "For the Lord will provide." And if He doesn't, who are we to question His mysterious ways? Besides, in the world after this one, He'll make it up to every innocent sufferer. After all, the United States is, nominally at least, made up of more than 90 percent believers, with family Bibles full of Old Testament begats inciting any amount of begetting. Dare any of our politicians speak against the Lord's fiat? . . .

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*If* we were wise we'd already have acted energetically on E. O. Wilson's dismay at the accelerating rate of extinctions. His little book *Biophilia*, written a quarter century ago, called for urgent measures in protecting the planet's diminishing species. Yet he ruefully conceded that "values are time-dependent." Wanting good things for ourselves and families, we also want them "for distant generations . . . but not at any great personal cost." And he predicted our present complacency: "The forests may all be cut, radiation slowly rise . . . but if the effects are unlikely to become decisive for a few generations, very few people will be

stirred to revolt.” Our evolutionary past simply didn’t prepare us “to respond emotionally to far-off events and hence place a high premium on posterity.”

Earth is now in a far more parlous state, yet for all the talk about it, our national response continues in slo-mo. Sanders quotes Thoreau on one of the causes: “most men . . . do not care for Nature and would sell their share in all her beauty . . . for a stated sum—many for a glass of rum.” I honor Thoreau but doubt that any except alcoholics would trade all nature for rum. Even so, I *don’t* doubt that tens of millions in the United States and countless other millions elsewhere will pay any amount of lip service to environmental sanity while privately thinking, “It’ll probably last out my time. After that, who cares. . . .”



Just where deities other than Yahweh stand on these issues I don’t know, but according to me, Earth already holds a billion or more too many of us. I therefore offer this modest proposal: concern for our planet should carry the imperative force of a moral absolute. Making a case for such concern isn’t necessary. To all reasonable Earthlings the cogency is self-evident—which leaves me only 6.5 billion votes short.

I shall respond to that landslide plebiscite with further foreseeing. We won’t need an asteroid to do the job. Out-of-control global swarming by everyone’s favorite weed species, *Homo sapiens*, will work its own ruin. Or will unless—as Malthus predicted—famine, war, and pestilence provide the bail-out. Private virtue won’t suffice.

Oh, yes, celebs and public pressure can make environmental sanity de rigueur. Give us celebs by all means, Hollywood hunks and bikini-clad hotties, though even they won’t be enough. The sanity I’m proposing must become law, complete with jail sentences. Government simply must get real.

Otherwise, our disappearance will have been the grotesquely comic result of sheer timidity—our tippy-toe, temporizing reluctance to meet what ancient Greeks called *anankê*, “hard necessity,” with a commensurately hardball decree: “Thou shalt not, under pain of law, have more babies than two.”

How very un-American. And, oh, how hopelessly reasonable.