

Apathy and Oil – July 2010

By John Jordan-Cascade

The horrendous (and ongoing) disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has me thinking about several things, most come under the heading of “punishment” and “prevention.” A deeply disturbing grief is quickly setting in about the whole mess. Grief about the response from our so-called leaders and the American people. For me, the recent ludicrous Supreme Court ruling codifying the idea that corporations have the same rights as people comes to mind after April 20th. If corporations now have the rights of people, what about the responsibilities? And if that is so, what about the death penalty for British Petroleum? Governments have the right, some would say the duty, to revoke corporate charters of any company that behaves in a reckless manner that is negligent of the public good.

By current accounts (a recent article by Jim Hightower chronicles their record: <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2010/06/16-2>), BP is the number one worst company in what appears to be an entire industry that is among the most irresponsible in a world (and era) of corrupt, shameful behavior.

...the Center for Public Integrity has revealed that the oil giant's current catastrophic mess should come as no surprise, for it has a long and sorry record of causing calamities. In the last three years, the center says, an astonishing "97 percent of all flagrant violations found in the refining industry by government safety inspectors" came at BP facilities. These included 760 violations rated as "egregious" and "willful." In contrast, the oil company with the second-worst record had only eight such citations.

The other thing that strikes me as especially ironic is that our culture is nearly awash in eloquent reminders of the preciousness and beauty of life. BBC and Discover and Disney have all come out in recent years with magnificent films and TV series that highlight, in high definition clarity, how utterly amazing and rare our planet is. We have inherited a living planet of stunning beauty and fortitude! So why are we not every day protesting in the streets to demand punishments for BP--and related corporations--for their ongoing criminal destruction?

I'm beginning to think we as a species have been so anesthetized by the notion of our own political impotence that we are fundamentally unable to recognize self-destruction. We appear to be frozen in fear—immobile with reluctance to prevent our demise, even when it stares us in the face. How drunk are we with apathy and despair that we cannot move to act? How addicted are we to the products of oil that we cannot demand a new vision from our leaders and even more difficult, from ourselves?

I will repeat what I've been saying to all those who care to listen: we are the leaders we've been waiting for! We don't need another Chernobyl" or "Bhopal" or "Katrina" or "Deepwater Horizon" to realize that the very way civilization operates, on a regular basis, day in and day out, is simply not sustainable for human survival.

I've been a citizen activist all my adult life, in one form or another, and I can tell you that there are dozens of ways we can contribute to a better future; from prayers to letter writing to nonviolent revolution and everything in between. Precisely what you do or how you express your anger, dismay or despair is, of course, up to you. I can only urge you to do something. Joining a group of folks doing something already is a great way to start. Changing the way things operate has never been much fun done in solitude, for obvious psychological reasons. It is plain to me that, as awful as this disaster is and as painfully destructive as it will be, there is a brief window of opportunity for us to press to significant change. A society run on clean, renewable energy is as good a vision as I can imagine.