What Losing an Argument Taught Me

I've gotten to the age (66) where I like to believe I can think critically, without obfuscating preconceptions, suppositions and an ill-formed worldview getting in the way. Recently, I became involved in an argument; this one about oil, the ecosystem and power. Now, by that, I don't mean *fight*, I mean a discussion of a topic where two people hold divergent views and discuss them, each citing his view, trying to score positive points, expecting that, at the end, one or the other will score more. At least, that's what I *thought* going in. I left with my tail between my legs, shot down in flames, humiliated, confused and depressed.

What happened? Was I that ignorant? Had I completely misread the facts? As I licked my wounds, I thought about it. Where had I gone wrong? In discussing it with Marilyn, enumerating my strengths and weaknesses, I think I identified some causes:

- One, I gave a flip answer inconsistent with my personal view—not a good idea.
- Two, the person I argued with completely closed off any facts, based on my sources, which countered his views. He stood on his PhD credentials and dismissed me because I didn't have one. He then set up a straw man argument by asking me if could predict the future. When I answered I couldn't he then shot down my argument in favor of his, as if *he* could predict the future! Based on that, how can one argue?
- Three, I underestimated my opponent; not only his credentials, but his intent. I finally gave up the field and retreated. I'll never argue with this individual again, nor will I speak with him beyond a cordial hello, or comment on the weather (with no predictions, since I'm incapable of it. ☺)
- Fourth, I realized I had entered an argument with a poorly constructed personal view on the subject, something a good friend once taught me to avoid. Shame on me. So, I looked at the subject—oil, the ecosystem and power—in an attempt to clarify my position. Here's what I've come up with.

In looking at power production in this country and worldwide, I've come to the inescapable conclusion that nuclear power, at least for the present, *isn't* the answer. The biggest problem comes from the fact that the byproduct—nuclear waste—consisting of material that is unknown in nature (unlike uranium) has a half-life of thousands of years! Since storage is the biggest problem, any accidents in its transport and geological accidents during its storage, regardless of where, will be serious and fatal. With coal- and oil-burning power stations, even a catastrophic event will result in shorter-term problems.

Speaking of coal and oil, what about them? For all the prattle about "carbon footprints" and "greenhouse gasses,"—and I'm not trying to minimize their impact—I feel we need to realize that we are fully invested in the exploration, discovery and exploitation of crude oil and coal. It's how our infrastructures and economies work, for we get so much more from crude oil and coal than cheap gas at the gas pump. We get heat for our homes and electricity when and where we need it; not to mention jobs for men and women who provide it. We also get chemicals that provide the raw materials for lubricants, drugs, plastics, cosmetics; even *food*!

Though I think that much of the rhetoric anti-oil factions base their argument on are supposition, flawed computer models, pseudo-science and out-and-out illogic, we can't ignore the impact on the environment either. Sometimes, it's the *way* we get oil. Take "fracking" (hydraulic fracturing), for instance, used to break up shale deposits to release the oil in it. If it *only* involved oil and water—and we know they don't mix—it would be one thing, but they also introduce highly toxic chemicals into the water to dissolve the oil. The problem there is we know from past experience what chemicals in groundwater can cause. Remember Love Canal, Karen Silkwood and Erin Brockovich?

Does that mean we should stop ALL oil production? Of course not! Our world economies *depend* on it! Is it without risk? No. Any method employed involves risk and accidents. No one thinks a big oil spill is no big deal, but they happen. We should take every precaution, exert sanctions and penalties, but we *mustn't* let that stop us from utilizing oil in our world. What would we do, if we stopped—revert back to the nineteenth century, where

mountains of horse manure threatened our cities and we still used gas and kerosene to light our homes? Let's face it: if even the most rabid "eco-freako"* stopped to consider it, would he or she want to give up the advantages of electricity, air travel, personal vehicles, the plethora of consumer products and central heat and air-conditioning? I think not.

I've arrived at a number of conclusions regarding the above subjects. I'll list them for simplicity:

- Since we've so heavily invested in oil, we should continue to exploit it. That's not to say we shouldn't seek to make its use as clean and efficient as possible. Employ the cleanest and most modern methods to produce power from coal and oil. Retrofit, over time, older power stations and refineries, using current technology to make the use of oil and its byproducts as efficient as possible. I honestly believe that, using current technology, we could see cars that not only get 40 miles to the gallon, but *150*! Imagine; if you owned a car that got that kind of mileage, even gas at *$10 a gallon* would be fine. If I filled up my tank (20 gallons), it might cost me $200, but that ONE tank would carry me from New York to California! It's all relative, isn't it? Plus, if our vehicles could wring every atom of power from a gallon of gas, doesn't it make sense that that vehicle would barely pollute?
- Continue to develop the much-ballyhooed "alternative power" sources. Though solar, wind and nuclear power are inefficient, insufficient, or dangerous *today*, that doesn't mean they *always* have to remain that way. As the technology improves *and when it becomes economically feasible and necessary*, we can then move to them, reducing our need for oil. We *CANNOT* allow politics and self-interested parties to dictate how we use oil and stymie its deployment! Face it; oil, coupled to the technology to exploit it, is the engine of freedom. Look what its use has done for the West! Is there any reason the Third World should remain that way? Of course not! Freedom is not only God-given; it's supposed to be universal!
- Just as we've done in the past, *use* technology to improve our impact on the ecology. No one, other than the most rabid technophobe, "eco-freako" Luddite can argue that we've cleaned up the environment over the past forty years. All around this country *and the world*, we have rivers and other bodies of water that are coming back from the brink of pollution-caused death. Where once you couldn't even *see* LA for the noxious smog, stringent measures have cleaned up the air to the point you see but a light haze on bad days. What caused the change? Technology! Is there room for improvement? Of course, but technology has the ability to clean up the messes it creates—if we take a deep breath, put aside our ranting and let it work.
- Don't be afraid to look at older technologies and retreat to them if they prove more efficient and viable. I know we've heard the phrase, "railroad to nowhere" ad nauseum, but it's a proven fact that trains are the most efficient form of land travel extant—based on cost per mile traveled. Thought light rail isn't viable in every case, it's a good idea in metropolitan and interurban areas. My middle son used to take the train from a station within walking distance of his house in the 'burbs, right to his office in the city. He could work, eat breakfast or sleep on the way in; didn't have a parking problem and minimized wear and tear on his car. When his company transferred him to another office, forcing him to commute by car, he got all the negatives listed, as well as an increase in his auto insurance.
- Last, let me list some tips I've found invaluable:

  - Don't base your opinions on what you see, or hear, on the media. Thirty-second sound bites do not a position make. Self-interest, duplicity and obfuscation are implicit in everything we see or hear in the media.
  - So, what's the answer? Inform yourself! Read, read, read—all sides of arguments—not just what tickles your ears. Nothing is black and white; sometimes it comes down to the lesser of evils.
  - Don't be afraid to change your views as new information becomes available, or comes your way. Stubborn refusal only serves to aggravate others and raises your blood pressure. Be honest with yourself and don't hang onto an invalid opinion just because you're afraid to admit your incorrect assumptions. You may not have 6 PhDs, but others do. Learn from them.

- Don't neglect your innate logic and suspicions. If something smells funny, there's a good reason for it. Dig deeper and you'll often find out why. Basing your argument on supposition will get you in trouble every time.
- Don't embroil yourself in fruitless arguments. Know when to bow out. If your opponent is immune to listening to you, or if you're on ground you're not sure of, it's fruitless to continue. As soon as it becomes evident to you, bow out gracefully and politely and learn from your mistakes. Don't descend to acrimony and mean-spiritedness.
- Be honest with others and yourself. Someone once paid me, when I came out second best in an exchange, the highest compliment I could have gotten: he told me that, even though proven wrong, I would admit it and be open to change my worldview. What's wrong with that?

And that very thing prompted this blog—someone caught me with my pants down and I suffered for it. Yet, it made me reexamine what I thought and what I feel and I'm better off for it.

* I use this term advisedly, since my experience with people of this ilk has shown them to be fanatical zealots, akin to religious zealots, who are immune to logic, facts and reason. "Don't confuse me with the facts," applies there.