

A Cooling-Off Period

Today is Friday, June 16th, 2017.

I came home from work Monday evening to find that two of my family members were ill from heat exhaustion. I went back out for a 12-pack of Gatorade and sandwich fixings and they took cool baths and rehydrated and started feeling better. They had both been surprised by their own dramatic physical reactions to a short time spent outside. It was only 90-something, but the humidity in the woods was intense.

I took this as a teachable moment to talk to the kids, over dinner, about how the weather is becoming more unpredictable and dangerous, and how this trend is going to continue as they get older. They must respect the weather in ways that just weren't often necessary for me, or my wife, when we were kids. This will include not just the increasing risk of heat exhaustion, but risk from flash floods, lightning, and high winds.

An EPA document from August 2016, titled "What Climate Change Means for Michigan," lays out some of the ways that anthropogenic global warming will affect Michigan:

Changing the climate is likely to increase the frequency of floods in Michigan. Over the last half century, average annual precipitation in most of the Midwest has increased by 5 to 10 percent. But rainfall during the four wettest day of the year has increased about 35 percent. During the next century, spring rainfall and annual precipitation are likely to increase, and severe rainstorms are likely to intensify. Each of these factors will tend to further increase the risk of flooding.

And:

Higher temperatures increase the formation of ground-level ozone, a pollutant that causes lung and heart problems. Ozone also harms plants. In some rural parts of Michigan, ozone levels are high enough to significantly reduce yields of soybeans and winter wheat.

Because I work indoors, in an air-conditioned building, and commute in an air-conditioned car, the only real misery I experienced this past week has been the effects of ozone, soot, pollen, and other particulates on my eyes, sinuses,

throat, and lungs. I've been unable to read aloud much because the low-grade irritation of my throat will bring on coughing fits.

And, of course:

In recent decades, severe heat waves have killed hundreds of people across the Midwest. Heat stress is expected to increase as climate change brings hotter summer temperatures and more humidity. Certain people are especially vulnerable, including children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor.

The heat was acutely uncomfortable in the afternoons this past week, but fortunately it cooled down enough each evening that we could sleep cool, which seems to allow the body to recuperate from heat stress and wake up refreshed. It gets really bad when it doesn't drop below 80 degrees F or so in the evenings, and the body doesn't have a chance to effectively recover. That's likely to happen this summer. Keep in mind that it isn't even officially summer yet.

If you don't live in Michigan, there is probably a similar document for your state. It probably doesn't paint a pretty picture. But if anything, I believe these documents aren't nearly alarmist *enough*. Our children won't thank us for leaving the planet in this condition, but maybe they will think slightly better of us if we do what we can to prepare them for the warming that is already inevitable.

Fortunately, Michigan is supposed to cool off a bit over the next few days. The forecast claims that highs next week will be in the seventies, with lows in the fifties. But I don't doubt that we will be hit hard by extreme heat this summer. It's been my experience that recently the weather forecasts have become quite unreliable. I think the forecasting models just haven't caught up with the facts in the atmosphere. So for several days now the highs have been higher than predicted, and the predicted rain has barely materialized.

I'd say that the weather, together with the very grim news from the Arctic, Antarctic, and global South, might be enough to push any remaining global warming deniers into a more realistic view. But from what I can see, as things get clearly and obviously worse, the true disbelievers are digging in and doubling down, and they will die, quite possibly of heat exhaustion or warming-amplified disease, still believing that it was all a hoax.

White Working Class

I finished *White Working Class: Overcoming Class Cluelessness in America* by Joan C. Williams. I think this book is worth reading, because it brings up some ideas for further discussion. There is a certain amount of insight to be gained here. As a Sanders supporter, I feel like I was already thinking about many of the things she has to say. Her book might help to identify and formalize some of these things. But the negatives remain.

The book conflates much of the working class and middle class in a way that I don't think is all that helpful, since there exist real and important differences between these groups. Yet even after warning about the dangers of Manichean black-and-white thinking, it creates a sharp distinction between these groups and the group she calls the "PME," or Professional and Managerial Elite. It accuses the PME of class "callousness," which I think is largely valid. But it fails, it seems to me, to explain that a large portion of the middle class treats members of the PME as role models, and so votes for the PME's Democratic party, even when they themselves are well below the income level required to be part of the PME, won't benefit much from the Democratic Party's policies in practice, and might be more usefully understood as being members of the great "precariat."

This, I think, is a sort of parallel to the "why do working-class people vote against their own best interests?" insights in Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, which Williams denigrates as paternalistic. Williams doesn't, it seems to me, talk much about the importance of real solidarity across class lines, but just advocates for vaguely-defined "compassion" and "understanding." And so it is a bit short on prescriptions.

What's So Funny 'Bout Compassion and Understanding?

I think the compassion and understanding she preaches is valuable, but only to a certain point. She also, in her quest to get her readers to have greater "compassion" and "understanding" for the group she calls the white working class, fails to level any honest criticism against this population, and bends truth and morality to defend them. For example, she repeats the commonplace idea that Vietnam veterans returning to the United States were spat upon by protesters.

This is actually untrue, but to this day it is part of the working class's mythology about itself, a slur that denigrates the anti-war movement and portrays those who fought overseas as victims of the culture wars. Jerry Lembcke debunks this myth in his book *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam*, but I still hear it told to me all the time.

In fact, I had a conservative friend tell me that her husband, a former soldier doing IT work, was actually spat on *in the White House* by a Clinton staffer, who allegedly also called him a "baby-killer." I've heard similar stories many times, but the details always mysteriously evaporate upon inquiry. There remain no contemporary accounts in newspaper or television media of any such incidents, except for a few cases in which the spit flew in the opposite direction.

Williams' retelling of this myth is similar, in my view, to the Southern insistence that flying the Confederate battle flag is about "heritage, not hate" — it's a form of self-serving historical revisionism which is "more true than the truth." The flag was not actually widely flown, postbellum, in the South, until the South chose it as a symbol to show defiance against Federal orders to integrate schools.

When she is “truthy,” not truthful, I have to part ways with Williams. And when she bends over backwards to express compassion for Trump supporters, without holding them to account for the real consequences of their ongoing support, I have to part ways with her as well. She mentions that the WWC “folkways” (which, honestly, is *quite* a condescending bit of terminology) must be seen as just as valid as the “folkways” of her PME. But when the “folkways” of both groups include lynching, slavery, gay-bashing, state violence, mass incarceration, and extreme environmental injustice, I think we need to talk more about our “folkways.”

Limits of Compassion

I have compassion for Trump voters and those who remain Trump supporters. But you know what I value more than compassion? Real solidarity and justice. And I don’t believe we can have truth and reconciliation with those who voted “with their middle fingers,” and who continue to parrot lies, without truth, any more than I can reconcile with those who still believe and insist that there was no valid criticism of Clinton from the left. Will I stop trying or give up hope? Absolutely not.

Just yesterday the *New York Times* demonstrated a truly impressive spine-twisting yoga pose called “both sides,” when it published an editorial that suggested that Sanders supporters need to consider their culpability for the mass shooting carried out by James T. Hodgkinson. I won’t link to the editorial, as I don’t want to give them any ad revenue for such ridiculous posturing, but the author suggests that this was a “moment for liberals to figure out how to balance anger at Mr. Trump with inciting violence.”

Personally, I’m not sure just what Hodgkinson’s disease was, but in the real world one can scour Sanders’ speeches, tweets, writings, and interviews in vain looking for examples where he has incited violence. And also in the real world, one doesn’t have to look very hard to find examples of such incitement coming from the political right. One might even start in the oval office.

Knausgaard Again

I just picked up a copy of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle, Book 5*, which has just come out in paperback. And so I’m diving back in to this massive novel.

***The Pirate Planet* By Douglas Adams and James Goss**

My voice is a little raw, but I’ve been reading bedtime stories as best I can. Last night I read more of *Doctor Who: The Pirate Planet*. The story has picked up a bit by the end of part one, at almost the 100-page mark. But we have over

three hundred pages to go, and it's hard to believe that the payoff is going to be worth it. In adapting the screenplay, Goss really over-inflated the ball. The book is heavily padded with lots of telling *sans* showing. I find myself wishing there was an abridged audiobook version available. But no — the audiobook is unabridged, and ten hours long.

The kids — big Doctor Who fans — are doing the best they can, but finding themselves bored. We should probably just cut our losses and watch the original episodes. I have ordered a DVD of this story arc from an eBay seller. Even if it isn't great — and I don't doubt it won't be (err, sorry about this sentence, it got away from me a little bit), it should be a good lead-in to a discussion about the dangers of adaptation.

Pottscast News

In the midst of all this, Grace and I have felt compelled to start recording again. And so this is a sort of “pre-announcement announcement” — we're going to be creating new episodes of the Grace and Paul Pottscast.

The web page will be a blog, like the blogs for my other podcasts:

<https://pottscast.blogspot.com/>

So bookmark that page. There is nothing there yet except for a placeholder image of a kitty. I'm allergic to cats, so don't blame me — Blogger put the image there. There will also be a Facebook page, but I have not created it yet.

The schedule for episodes is not clear to us yet. The exact contents of the first few episodes are not fully clear to us yet, although we've been brainstorming and making some test recordings. My recording setup is working right now, but if it stops working, we may not have the money available to get it working again for a while. And we're going to be pretty busy in July. Our baby girl will have open-heart surgery. That's pretty terrifying. But maybe it will help to talk about it. I'll do what I can to get some new content out there. And hopefully with my wonderful wife's help, it will be better than the old stuff.

*Paul R. Potts
Pittsfield Township, Michigan
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