

Kicking the Travel Drug



I am forty-five years old. I consider myself to have lived a luxurious life in terms of the spectrum of experience that has been available to me and the leisure to seek it. Yet by the developed world's standards of today, I have only ever been modestly privileged.

I never flew in an airliner until I was twenty-two. This seemed pretty normal to me. Why would anyone need to engage in such an extravagance any sooner than this, after-all? Even at the time, I recall thinking that flying to Winnipeg for a wedding was a bit excessive. Contrastingly, I know young children today who are already veterans of international and trans-continental flight.

While this sort of excess was pretty much the sole territory of a choice few adults in my youth, it is considered neither extreme nor abnormal for people of all ages today. We have become, in my incomplete lifespan, even amongst the common ranks that include myself, a people of extreme indulgence, and nowhere is this more evident than in our near incessant transit.

Travel. The way we do it today, it is one of the least sustainable things that we do. Yet if we are not traveling, then it is likely we are planning to, or at least looking forward to our next physical journey. Any awareness of the global situation forces the conclusion that history has picked a particularly ill advised juncture to find ourselves suffering from a malaise that flies in the face of all that is intuitive given the indisputable evidence of our times. This malaise, dubbed "the travel bug" by others, is rampant among us and I don't think this perception is simply the heightened awareness of a guy who has returned to horse-farming.

Despite the fact that I involve myself in circles of high concern for environmental issues (social issues, really), including many with a keen awareness of the implications of peaking oil production, it is nonetheless still true that virtually no one I know is willing to stay put these days.

While Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Movement says that "...we are going to see extraordinary levels of change in every aspect of our lives," I despair when I look around me and witness quite the contrary. It is the "same-old same-old" indulgences of our industrial era I see being taken to extraordinary levels, almost as though we are doing it out of spite.

Nowhere does this seem to be more visible than in our travel habits. We've never driven bigger vehicles and we've never driven faster. (Try driving the speed limit and you'll see about this last one). We've never spent so much time on planes and in our cars.

Fleeing futility?

I suppose I understand this, at least in part. The restlessness of the times that is in all of us, the feelings of futility we may experience in the face of our obstacles, the desire to do something, may be at the root of all this running off.

Certainly traveling is doing something. It focuses attention in a way that feels important. It provides, in fact, all the trappings of a potent narcotic. At times I'm sure we resort to travel as a medication — out of the desire to escape from the malignant forces around us that grows ever stronger as these forces escalate.

Certainly it doesn't help that many choose to remain in intensely unsatisfying places well worth escaping from, like the suburbs for instance, arguing as my one friend does, "I don't need to live somewhere I prefer. It's more convenient here and I can just go anywhere in my car on my days off."

Legitimate energy use?

Even more perversely, I have heard people say, "If oil is going to get scarce soon, I better take advantage of what's left and use it now." Understandable as this may be on one level, it is nonetheless especially counter-intuitive when, to invoke Rob Hopkins again, oil is "such useful stuff" that every drop will be needed to fuel legitimate enterprises aimed precisely at weaning ourselves off of it. The argument being that it takes energy to change, and right now, for us, "energy" means oil. Shouldn't "don't squander it!" be our mantra, then?

And what then does constitute legitimate energy use in our times? Increasingly among my peers, the stated argument for spending so much time traveling is education. I admit that this sounds legitimate at first utterance, but I am then tempted to be glib and ask why it is that, with more folks traveling more easily, do we seem more intensely ignorant than ever of the most significant details affecting life on earth?

I am nonetheless willing to subscribe at least in part, if just perhaps for the point of argument, to the spirit of traveling as a vehicle of education. Of educating others, perhaps, or as I hear more from my peers these days, specifically as a way to gain education about how to live in a post-hydrocarbon world.

Point in argument: a common destination for my peers these days is Europe. Europe is where they will go to somehow learn how to properly live here in Canada. I'll be devil's advocate then and ask why it is, if Europe is the place, do we host the irony of a steady stream of Europeans right here in Alberta who journey all the way to our little farm in Canada to ostensibly learn the same things?

I think the obvious answer is that the point is not the place — neither place, in fact, is doing things right on the whole, but there are nonetheless plenty of useful things to learn just about anywhere if one does a little digging. That if the truth be spoken, it is not the learning but the act of traveling that is the point for these people. The place matters only so far as it must be somewhere else. Only then do you get the hit, the fix that the drug of travel delivers.

Execution trumps education

Watching all these important people incessantly running off gives me great trepidation these days. I have a growing intuition that we are crossing the threshold where there's far greater value to be had — and provided — in staying home, on a grave multitude of levels. You can only be in one place at one time. Using energies in far off locales, do you not then potentially dilute whatever positive impact you might have had at home?

Here, in point form, are some interrelated reasons I have come up with just off the top of my head why you might consider kicking the travel habit if education is your stated goal.

- Learning to live somewhere else may not be transferable — it may not be the same thing as learning to live where you plan to settle. Even a farm down the road may not be the same as a farm a mile distant, requiring a different knowledge and skill set to coax the best from it;
- There are growing movements and enterprises at home that are of limited resources and considerable vulnerability that desperately need the involvement of people like you to become resilient, and the pool of help is currently limited. Your presence in your community is vital today, your absence may be potentially lethal to fledgling ventures;
- Shouldn't you be saving the resources you're expending in travel doing instead the actual work required of change?;
- We have the information we need, more than we need in fact — what we don't have yet is the concerted effort for real change — stay home and help it begin in earnest!;
- Education does not replace execution anymore than awareness replaces action. In fact, many cultures do not use the word "knowledge" if there has been no successful application.

Education on its own, without the majority being engaged in application, is at worst little more than a self-absorbed cycle producing nothing of tangible worth;

- You learn far more by doing, and again, you are better to be doing what you do of importance wherever it is you call home. You will then additionally have a head-start on your own enterprise or one directly valuable to you, and you won't need to worry about the new knowledge not translating to your home turf;
- This is the age of easy info — stay home and take advantage of this instead of cheap airfares and the last of our easy oil; for a point in case, I learned to train and farm successfully with draft horses right on our own place by doing with newly purchased untrained horses what a stack of books no farther away than the kitchen bookshelf advised — no seminars, no courses, no long roadtrips, no airplanes.

Hard questions

What then of the resources other than oil you may be squandering in travel? Even if you were traveling by bicycle, foot, horse, or sailing ship, is the money and time and energy you'd spend on travel not more important to your local community? To establishing yourself in your place of choice? To developing an inner stillness, perhaps?

When you get back, how much of value has evaporated from your resources? Has it been replaced by something of reciprocal worth, or is life “over there” simply a different life that may well not translate to home?

If it does translate, was it necessary to journey around the world to find it, worth the costs not only to yourself but to all of us? We all ultimately bear the costs of one another's extravagances. A wealthy man might argue that he can afford to drive a Hummer, but he's wrong — in the larger sense, he can't and more importantly, neither can any of the rest of us, afford his driving a Hummer, either.

I understand that it wasn't so long ago, in the days when travel was indeed more aptly described by the root travail (work), when we all knew more of the art of having to derive our contentment in situ. Aside from the fact that travel once entailed a level of courage and competence it mostly does not today, we simply didn't have the “insane levels of mobility” (as one author described things today) back then. We were very much subject to the Tyranny of Place. I have long suspected, and am now learning from experience, that there may be more life satisfaction to be had in coming to peace with this tyrant than in running from it.

So long, self-indulgence

Earlier in this decade I turned down a prestigious speaking gig at the first wolverine conservation symposium in Sweden when the supreme irony of what it would take to get me there (trains and planes and etc.), not to mention the personal resources misplaced — to talk about conservation no less — came home to roost.

What seemed important was at second glance really just an opportunity for self-indulgence, for disseminating information at great expense to many (including the wolverines themselves) already published in the literature, available in journal form and online.

Since then, I travel very little. An hour's trip by car is an adventure these days (and one I'd rather be experiencing with my horses), but I suspect that many today wouldn't even consider this "travel." I suspect that many don't consider such trips at all, in fact. We just do them — easy!

But the less I travel, the more I become attuned to the subtle yet infinite variety of my particular chosen place, the less I wish to travel. Perhaps this should come as no surprise — if you accept that travel is a drug for us, the first step to kicking the habit is to refuse to indulge it.

Each location on earth is in fact many different worlds, changing hour by hour with the sun and moon, changing as well with the weather, the seasons, the birds and the animals and the people that come and go, the inner space of the observer. What liberty in discovering that all the satisfaction one needs from life is right here within and around you on your own home turf!

Source: <http://ourworld.unu.edu/en/kicking-the-travel-drug>