



GRIOT™

JWR 4.27

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The mortician ... went on to tell me with bow-wow cheerfulness back in 1987 that people were generally mistaken about how quickly things rot, turn into good old dirt or fertilizer or dust or whatever. He said scientists had discovered well-preserved meat and vegetables deep in city dumps, thrown away presumably years and years ago. ...[T]hese theoretically biodegradable works of Nature had failed to rot for want of moisture, which was life itself to worms and fungi and bacteria.

-Kurt Vonnegut

I had an idea for a Rambling. It's a theory that I've contrived by means of my brain's processes. I am curious to hear an intelligent opinion on it. Here it goes. I hate cemeteries. So, people live. During their lives, they eat food, grown from the earth, comprised of basic minerals. Ok, people eat food, people are made of food, and people are made of basic minerals. I hope you're still with me. For all life, save humans, upon death, the body of the deceased will decompose and eventually return to its simplest state and be reabsorbed into the earth as basic minerals. Those minerals will be used by the earth to grow plants. Those plants will be consumed by other animals and used as basic building blocks in their respective physiological growth, i.e. construction of tissues, etc. You can see the cyclical process of life I'm describing here. Ok, on to my point. Humans remove a step. When humans die, they embalm the body, place it in a metal box, then place it in a concrete box, then bury it 6 feet below the surface of the earth. Now, I wonder, how will a body that's been embalmed, encased twice and then buried, be able to decompose to a state of basic minerals from which it was created throughout its life, and be re-entered into the cycle of life on earth... from which it was created? So, by creating this step of funerals and the accompanying rituals that humans have

adapted, we are taking an important step out of the cycle of life on a planetary level. Question: How many nutrients are being stored in caskets that are inside vaults and cemeteries around the world? Question: How does this deficit of basic life building minerals and ingredients affect the earth's ability to sustain life upon it, especially with an exponentially growing population; and is there a connection to the apparent need to fortify all foods produced today? Question: Is the human race starving the planet, thereby, killing itself off by practicing this selfish ritual of "holding on to the memory" of a deceased person that is now of more use to the planet as fertilizer than a monument? I'd love to hear your thoughts on this!

~Andrew J. Schoeberl

That was sent to me over two years ago. I would have responded sooner, but I've been busy catching up on all the correspondence my Ramblings have generated. I try to answer all letters; please forgive the lateness of my reply.

Needless to say, this one stuck in my own brain's processes since I read it. Well, let's start off by cynically answering the questions posed.

Question: How many nutrients are being stored in caskets that are inside vaults and cemeteries around the world?

Answer: Not really that many. A trillion gallons of water evaporate from the oceans each day. One trillion every day. About 155,000 people die each day and not all of them are embalmed and frozen in Carbonite - just the ones that die in the civilized world. It's not a big deal. That's 8,350,000,000,000 pounds of water compared to 23,250,000 pounds of people. I'm not making a direct comparison; I'm just asking what does 23 million pounds of missing meat mean in the grand scheme of things when 8 trillion pounds of water evaporates to form clouds every day? The question also assumes the bodies will never get back into the cycle. They will.

Question: How does this deficit of basic life building minerals and ingredients affect the earth's ability to sustain life upon it, especially with an exponentially growing

population; and is there a connection to the apparent need to fortify all foods produced today?

Answer: It doesn't. Food is a renewable resource. Actually all resources are renewable, even fossil fuels, if you believe, as I do, that over millions of years plants and animals anaerobically decompose to form fossil fuels. They may not be as readily renewable as crops, but they *are* renewable is all I'm saying. Also, crop yields have increased exponentially along with population growth – genetic engineering of crops is as old as agriculture itself. There's enough food. We just lack the ability and/or compassion to send it everywhere it's needed.

As far as fortifying all foods produced today... that's just a byproduct of our lifestyle. If all we had to eat were fresh food from crops and freshly slaughtered animals, the idea of food fortification wouldn't exist and wouldn't need to exist. But because we live a modern life where I work eight hours and want to watch TV and sleep another eight hours and hang out with friends (and write stuff), I just can't take the time to prepare fresh food every day. So, they invented these companies that make processed food for me so all I have to do is pop it in the microwave for two minutes on high. (This implies that I eat microwave dinners. I don't. I probably should – it might be better for me than some of the other choices I sometimes make.) And those companies figure, why not throw in some extra B12? People fall for it and see it has more niacin and buy it because of that.

Question: Is the human race starving the planet, thereby, killing itself off by practicing this selfish ritual of “holding on to the memory” of a deceased person that is now of more use to the planet as fertilizer than a monument?

Answer: No. Even if you're right and we're taking away needed materials to propagate life on the planet, the planet isn't being starved: we are.

Last time I was at a cemetery I was struck by the stupidity of the funeral procession, not the potential issue of removing needed resources from the cycle. I was like, *Why don't we just meet at the cemetery? We didn't even meet at a church*

first. We were at the funeral home, and then we drive through red lights across town only to have another powwow in the cemetery. It took forever.

Okay, so let's delve into this idea that burying people in caskets with formaldehyde in their veins screws up the natural cycle. (By the way: you can get a green funeral in many places where they don't embalm you and bury you in what amounts to a sturdy cardboard box.) The idea itself is flawed... to an extent. In some ways that concept seems to state we're talking about a closed system, nothing additional in or out. This is both correct and incorrect. It depends on what you're talking about.

If you mean the earth is the closed system, that's wrong because you only need to watch the sky on a clear night for a few minutes before you see a streaking meteor entering our atmosphere. So much for closed systems.

Now, the universe itself is a closed system (as far as we know). In fact, it's not only a closed system, but it seems to be the *only* system (parallel universes notwithstanding - there's no way to interact with them even if they are real). There is nothing else.

Also there's the idea that taking a body out of the very literal mix when it dies has bigger ramifications. I guess this could also be both correct and incorrect.

When I die and am buried, segregated from the earth so my liquefying corpse goodies can't ooze back into the soil hurting the overall system of the world, it has to have some effect. (If we assume that all the bodies being buried have an effect, then a single body has to have an effect, as insignificantly, infinitesimally small as it may be.) What if I get cremated and my ashes sit on some dude's end table for a thousand years? I don't get put back into play then either. Maybe without my baser stuff in the ground a tree won't grow, and because that tree doesn't grow it means a bird can't nest in it and a fox can't catch that bird. But that's where it ends. Mere drops in the ocean, there're tons of trees and birds and foxes.

The concept also seems to assume there isn't any wiggle room in the way life works here. We grow more corn than we need. An example is the corn that we, for some reason, use as ethanol. That corn won't be eaten, so it's taken out of the life cycle equation. But it's okay because it's not a perfect system. It won't be missed.

This also assumes that the casket and concrete bunker they dip our dead fuck-sacks into won't decay over time themselves. They will. It may take hundreds or thousands of years, but they will. If *Life after People* taught me anything, it's that everything manmade will be gone within 10,000 years. Eventually my shit will get back in the shit.

A lot of plants rely on animals for continued existence. And I'm not talking about pollination (an abomination), I'm talking about some animal eating a vegetable, the seeds passing through the animal's digestive system unharmed and being shit out ten miles away where it can sit in a nice warm, nutritious pile of feces as it germinates.

We spit in nature's face there, too. We shit in a toilet and flush it away to some water treatment plant (unless you live in Milwaukee - then your shit seems to go directly into Lake Michigan) - it never even sees the soil. Are you bemoaning the loss of all the corn kernels or cucumber seeds that won't grow up big and strong and have itty bitty baby corns and cukes of their own? - don't even get me started on creamed corn. Technically it's murder, like spilling *your* seed on the ground.

For all life, save humans, upon death, the body of the deceased will decompose and eventually return to its simplest state and be reabsorbed into the earth as basic minerals. This part is wrong. Think about all the pets we have that get incinerated upon their death, and all the un-adopted domesticated animals. Think about all the animals we eat that get flushed. It's a lot.

The documentary *King of Corn* was a bit of a bipolar affair. Half the movie was about farmers and government policies that kept corn farming profitable.

The other half was basically: you are what you eat. They talked about our high-corn content diets. We feed corn to cattle. We eat the cattle. We add high fructose corn syrup to many foods and we eat that. Corn is in us. We are corn.

But beyond that...

Carl Sagan and J Michael Straczynski have said this better than I can, so I won't try to make it poetical beyond this: We are star stuff. The same stuff that make up stars, make up us.

(Even so, hydrogen... by far the most plentiful element in the universe... I just don't want it in my peanut butter.)

Basic physics tells us that matter can neither be created nor destroyed. A star that existed six billion years ago blew up and that expelled matter coalesced into everything we see and are. We're all made of it. Our common ancestors came from Africa but their common ancestor was a red giant.

Even if it takes a million years for my dead, artificially preserved, concrete encased corpse to break down and get back into the earth, it'll get there.

But most of us don't think like that (myself included, usually). We think in the short term. We live seventy-five years, maybe a hundred, maybe less, and we get stuck in the ground. Out of sight and out of mind. And those of us who stand up there and get to watch someone we loved or hated or loved and hated get stuck down there are left to wonder: *What's going to happen to their body? It takes a crew of a dozen guys weeks to rip up a concrete road. That metal box inside a concrete box buried in the ground isn't going anywhere. Look at all the bodies around here. How many putrefied and liquefied organic stews are sloshing around in their boxes, cut off from the world? We're running out of oil. Are we running out of organic materials too?*

Take a look outside. All I see out there from my office window is green: trees, grass, bushes and weeds. I think we'll be okay. And even if we won't, it'll be a while. Dozens of generations from now might have to deal with an actual problem. You don't care about them, do you?

I don't.

In 12 billion years our sun will blow up and everything that we are, everything that makes us up, everything that we know and love, will get sent out to re-coalesce somewhere else as another star or planet, or maybe even another life form five billion years after that.

"If the symmetry were any more perfect, I should think one of us would break into tears." - JMS

John

PS: Thanks, Andy, for the emails.

You kick and scream and cry out into the darkness, and no answer comes. You rage against the unfathomable injustice and two blocks away some guy watches a baseball game and scratches his balls.

Scientists talk about dark matter, the invisible, mysterious substance that occupies the space between stars. Dark matter makes up 99.99 percent of the universe, and they don't know what it is. Well I know. It's apathy. That's the truth of it; pile together everything we know and care about in the universe and it will still be nothing more than a tiny speck in the middle of a vast black ocean of Who Gives a Fuck.

-David Wong