

# Of Tire Slashing, Strangers and St. Augustine ...

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This morning the right-front tire of my car was slashed - probably with a knife.

I was not alone; several cars in my neighborhood had the same thing happen. In almost every case the same tire was slashed. The right-front tire.

It seems insignificant \$68.74 to replace it and an hour or so of lost time. In other more 'normal' times a person would be inclined to explain it away as merely 'kids having fun' and 'rebellling against norms', but in this age when fear is catching, flash mobs seem recurrent and hyped, and people are locked away in their own electronic worlds... Well... Such an incident feels more significant than a mere 'prank' - as if the world were trying to have a conversation with me.

I know many of us watched, with horror, the [LA riots in 1992](#). There have always been riots and chaos. No, all of human history IS NOT chaos - but much of it is less than civilized. I know we watched the [riots in London/UK recently](#) and thought to ourselves, "well, it can't happen here". I would suggest reviewing the [Wisconsin State Fair incident](#) if you feel inclined to judge those '[decadent Europeans](#)', but no need to push. There are examples of violence like this everywhere these days; there are wars and rumors of war.

I don't know how often, per capita, [tires are slashed](#) in the US. Statistics like this usually make me feel better - as strange as that may seem. These 'numbers' and 'abstractions' feel safe. They provide a sense of boundaries and barriers to that darkness that lingers 'in the woods'. Not personal boundaries but rather physical/existential ones. Somehow, knowing how often tire slashing happens makes the event less personal/directed and more like a generalized symptom of some social phenomena or a kind of natural disaster. To know that this is a normal

event is also to feel protected. Even fake normality is better than none. If, for a moment, you suppose that it is not normal - and worse, that it might in some perverted way be personal - then you are forced down that road of looking at your neighbors with suspicion. Neighbors who are often strangers these days to begin with - fellow and reciprocal travelers of the 'Stranger Danger' era.

I live in the Greenwood neighborhood of Seattle-WA, not too far from Carkeek Park (a nice city park with trails going down to the salt water and Puget Sound). The neighborhood could be seen as a transitory place; somewhere between poverty and the middle class with a whiff of gentrification still in the air. This neighborhood was one of those places on the road of improvement prior to the housing collapse.

My wife and I moved into the neighborhood a year ago when we were forced to downsize. The place where we live is nice, though the rent could not be considered a bargain. I suppose, by Seattle standards, 1200/month in rent is cheap, but not so much when the neighborhood seems to be deteriorating.

About 8 months ago I began noticing gang tags; MS13 and other gang symbols sprayed on the back of traffic signs and other signage in and around the neighborhood - including walls and bridges. These tags seemed more like the markings of predatory animals than humans.

No, I am not calling gangs animals, the term animal in this sense is loaded and can be seen as racist. Rather, I use the word animal to signify something non-racial but very much part of the collective psyche of ALL HUMANS and a force that cannot be contained if it is provoked. I say 'animal', because we are all (as humans) natural creatures. Yes, we are all animals. We convince ourselves that we have laws/rules/justice, but in reality we have a social contract that appears voluntary these days. We see

ourselves as gentle or at least less rough/coarse/cruel than our counterparts in nature. Some of us are ~~Q~~vegans~~Q~~ and renounce the flesh for food. Funny, but I don't think you need stereoscopic vision to track carrots and celery. Nonetheless, we have an inflated notion of our essential goodness and we can, in part, blame [Rousseau](#) and his acolytes for this misconception. Man in a state of nature might not be the monster that Hobbes conceives of him as, but he is certainly not the pure primordial being of Jean-Jacques.

Along the lines of Rousseau, and his notions of society breeding evil, children today - especially the poor - are taught to believe that the "system" (economic/political) is unfair. Children are taught that the rich take advantage while the poor are losing their homes. Kids are taught that if their neighbor has something they want, they should take it - by force if necessary. This last lesson is not taught by our teachers alone; this last lesson is taught primarily by example.

President Obama and President Bush - and others before them and with them - have created a moral environment in which it is OK to print money in order to prop up home prices. Forget the damage this 'free money policy' does to [the developing world and its ability to feed its children](#). Our leaders (like Bush/Obama) are OK with waging war for natural resources, as long as some slim excuse can be found based on some even slimmer interpretation of political freedom. The recent - supposedly finished - war in Libya was not about Thomas Jefferson and the Statue of Liberty; it was about [light sweet crude oil and its importance to the European economy](#). Light-sweet crude is easier to refine and easier to make into low sulfur diesel - something the EUROZONE needs as a matter of regulation.

We might believe that our actions since [911](#) have been all about the war on terrorism, but even the most gullible

amongst us knows the truth - we need OIL, we need cheap energy. We need as much cheap energy as we can get and we will do what we can to get it. The [US may have peaked in Oil production in 1970](#), but the US has not peaked in its ability to rationalize war.

I am an Atheist. As an Atheist<sup>1</sup>, but also a reflective person, I am constantly at odds with myself. On days like today I am forced to ask questions that frankly many Atheists never ask. The typical Atheist is not that much different from the typical Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, etc.

Atheists are just as capable of dogmatic belief to the point that the belief erodes reason itself. On days like this, I am wondering when the official moral code of the Atheist is going to be developed, when it is going to 'kick-in' and allow us to replace the 'terrible scourge' of religious norms. 'Terrible Scourge' is sarcasm - certainly rhetorical. To this day most if not all the good people I have met in this life have been deeply religious folk in one way or another.

Religion, however, is NOT a guaranteed bulwark against chaos or evil either. Religion is often used as a way to justify the immoral and pollute discussions concerning ethics. If ethics is the study of 'values in action', then Religion is surrender to the blindly irrational. Religion HAS fueled war/violence and continues to do so today. It's easy for the west to judge "Radical Islam" for its dark hold and goals yet I doubt many Europeans would be alive today if the combatants during the [wars of religion \(1509-1648\)](#) had nuclear weapons at their disposal. Thankfully, their hatred and the technology of vengeance were not in alignment.

What would 'The Christian' say about the tire slashing?

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<sup>1</sup> I wrote this when I was still an Atheist, I don't deny my past, or the words I had written. I am no longer an Atheist - I consider myself paleo-Christian.

- 1) It is a sign of absent Fathers in the home.
- 2) It is an example of the failure of public schools to teach right/wrong.
- 3) It is emblematic of an age where morality is simply non-existent.
- 4) It comes from the 'end of religious America' - we don't go to Church and hence our children (or young adults) have no moral compass.
- 5) It is a sign of the times and possibly an indication of moral decay heading towards apocalypse.

What does an Atheist say about the tire slashing?

- 1) It has nothing to do with Fathers or Mothers per se. Sure, having a healthy family life acts as a barrier to vandalism and violence, but it is no guarantee. Kids from good families slash tires and children from bad family environments become healers, teachers and good people.
- 2) It is economics. We are seeing the prima facie example of what a declining economic world looks like and tire slashing (though quite innocuous in many ways) is a simple tale that feeds this meme.
- 3) It is social and political. It is the feeling of disenfranchisement.
- 4) It is decay and entropy. The basic physics of civilized life requires an injection of energy/wealth to maintain structure. Just as a home, left unkempt, will eventually deteriorate and disappear from neglect, so also society falls apart if we do not, in some way, help in its upkeep. I once called this 'the entropy tax', and it MUST and is ALWAYS paid in one form or another.

This confusion between atheism and religion on the question of individual action is not the concern. What is truly sad is that this was the first time, since moving into my apartment, that I had actually 'met' any neighbors. I grew up in Washington state. I had lived in other places for a long time, but I returned home in 2007. When I came home I was hoping that it was still 'home' and still a place where I was welcome. Why should it take some vandal to force a bunch of people to 'see each other' - not as monsters, strangers, enemies or friends, but instead just see each other as fellow humans/citizens who want to live in peace and relative freedom?

If we are afraid of our neighbors, we are acting from a position of 'no knowledge'. We SHOULD be cautious, but caution does not mean cowardice. We should be careful with our kids, but does it really make them safer to describe a world in terms as stark and binary (with no gradation) as those words used by 'adults' today - a world that is linguistically divided between takers/victims, liberal/conservative, good and bad?

Why must it take several hundred dollars of property damage to bring people out of their little **electronic caves** to see that the world is NOT populated by enemies and dangers but rather by people. People who are not that different from us?


This may seem like 'dumb questioning', but sometimes reality is not captured by the complex inquiry - sometimes it is the simple question that truly exposes and explains.

I grew up during the 70's and 80's and in many ways the 70's were the most formative.

I remember the [Mr Yuck](#) campaign against childhood poisoning.

[I remember Iron Eyes Cody and the sad 'Indian' as he canoed down the garbage ridden river](#), showing our dangerous disregard for ecology.

I remember the fear of poisoned Tylenol bottles and razors in candy bars on Halloween.

I remember the scares involving cults and satanic rituals  reinforced by the real horror of [Jim Jones and the Peoples Temple](#).

I remember the horrible time when the [hostages were held in Tehran \(IRAN\)](#) and I remember the general feeling (especially in the late 70's and early 80's) that things we're headed towards nuclear war - one of my favorite film genres as a kid was the ever present dystopian or apocalyptic film.

In addition to these 'real' events, here is a short list of some memorable apocalyptic/dystopian films which reinforced this 'sense of my time':

- 1.[Defcon 4](#): a film about a space based nuclear weapons officer who returns to Earth (Oregon to be precise) after a nuclear war.



2. [A Boy and His Dog](#): a story about 'a boy and his dog' who are psychically linked and their adventure in a post nuclear holocaust world.
3. [Brazil](#): (I love Terry Gilliam) a vision of the future and eerily familiar during our continuing War on Terrorism.
4. [Damnation Alley](#): another post-nuclear war survival adventure - George Peppard is one of my favorite actors.
5. Of course, the great Charlton Heston trilogy: [Planet of the Apes](#), [Soylent Green](#) and [Omega Man](#) films greatly underrated. Of the 3, I would choose Omega Man as being the most interesting for our time because it deals with the problem of moral choice and redemption in a world absent of hope or social order.
6. [Logan's Run](#): a film for the paranoid in all of us and another typical incarnation of the "Allegory of the Cave" model in film (other 'cave' films would include The Matrix and THX 1138).
7. [The Day After...](#): a TV miniseries about the outcome of nuclear holocaust.

These films fed my youthful skepticism. If I am honest, these films fed my [schadenfreude as well](#). I could always say, even as a kid, that "at least things are not this bad yet". That feeling kept me lukewarm, but warm without any sense of optimism. Darker still, I could take a perverted pleasure in seeing the concrete (if fictional) manifestation of all human folly - in increments of 120 minutes.

Yes, my generation was fed a diet of [fear](#) in and from

media/mediums that were evolving at exponential rates - as I suspect EVERY generation is to some degree (we have no monopoly on fear or fear mongers).

Our televisions got bigger, better.

Our networks multiplied.

The internet came and provided us with 'fear and paranoia' on demand - in addition to feeding our prurient interests (take online pornography for example).

Radio, instead of being 'killed by the video store', became a new vehicle for anger, frustration and expression by primarily right-wing speakers. Before you make assumptions about my politics, I can tell you that the left would have done the same thing if they were not so boring and frankly annoying in their superficial self-flagellation. The left wants to sell guilt as entertainment, but seem to be ignorant of what 'purpose' these medium serve.

What is the message that the 'right', 'left' and political class wants us to hear?

- Some of us are good.
- Some of us are evil.
- Choose wisely!

It is a simplistic message. It simply indicates that the 'time of compromise and cooperation' is at an end. It is, for lack of a better cliché, "every man/woman for

himself/herself". The 'stranger' in the stranger/danger equation is always 'the other' - we fail to see that each of us IS 'the stranger' from the other vantage point. The 'stranger' or the 'evil' is always a paradox with this equation - a replaying of the ancient myth of Janus. We are all seen, by those who do not know us, as 'different', 'risky' and (yes) sometimes as evil. We have bumper stickers which simplify (over-simplify) who we are and we further exaggerate this separation by communicating in segments and fractured pieces of understanding. We take one look at the rear of someone's car and decide 'who' this stranger is.

**Stranger danger** is not just about being afraid of child molesters, rapists, criminals and other dark figures from our dark human swamp of despair and depredation.

Stranger danger is not just about making sure children are protected.

Stranger danger is the isolation of human existence to the point that it becomes pathological.

When we construct a world where "liberals are evil" and "conservatives are heartless", we are also building a world where common ground disappears and the public realm becomes a no man's land. None of this is really 'new', but we live in an age where what is 'old is new again' and exaggerated beyond all limits.

I, for one, am tired of assuming my neighbors are good or bad. I cannot know without venturing forth. I am tired of

the general zeitgeist of my city - Seattle - that believes 'only through government is salvation found'. I am tired of being told that safety nets, entitlements and special agencies will protect us - we just need to pay the fee (to the tax man). As contradictory as this might sound, I think the modern state - and this is not a liberal or conservative indictment - is regressing us back to the ancient human. Government is making us less civilized. Instead of venturing forth, greeting our neighbors with joy and courage, we hide in our homes and apartments - treating Facebook as a moral equivalent to human contact. In times of trouble, in the age of 'convenience', we expect helicopters to come and men/women to spring forth saying - "I am from the government and I am here to help you."

I don't really know what the first step is - maybe it is just stepping out the door.

I don't know if I should knock on my neighbor's doors and say hello.

I don't know, if I were to go out into my neighborhood, meeting and greeting, if this would make any difference at all. I suspect some would consider this creepy - one of the many outcomes of the 'stranger danger', 'child abduction' and 'latchkey kid' fear mongering ABC after school specials from the 70's. But I am quite certain of one thing - if we stay in our hobbit holes this 'fear of the stranger' will only get worse.

***As to the vandal, who slashed the tires, I can't really say much.***

I am fairly certain, based on the numbers of people changing their tires this morning, that it was an act of man and not an act of God/Nature. It could have been one kid or several. It could have been a gang. It might even have been an adult filled with rage/envy/hate. The vandal, as with vandals in all times and places, can be seen as a person or as a phenomena. I choose phenomena, but frankly neither the 'personal' nor the 'phenomenological' interpretation is all that comforting.

When I was 18, during my first year away at college, I came home on Halloween and went about the community - a small town 60 miles north of Seattle - blowing up pumpkins with my buddies. We used [M80's](#) - an illegal explosive that the 'guy' at the [Native American Reservation](#) would sell, behind the vendors store front. An old woman, who was a 'stranger' to me, yelled [crab apples](#) at us as we ran away. What I did was wrong. What I did was silly and stupid. As I got older I still felt that need to be chaotic, but channeled it away from indiscriminate acts and towards the less destructive - with varying degrees of success. I am no criminal, but I think it is easy to judge the 'outrages of youth' through a 'glass darkly'.

After that night of the M80s, more than 2 decades ago, I never did something quite like that again. I continued to be boyish in my behaviors, but not like that.

A few years after the 'crab apple' incident I was reading [The Confessions' of St. Augustine](#), and the passages which dealt with his 'youthful indiscretions' - specifically, the

theft of fruit and the vandalism. The ideas expressed by Augustine frightened and comforted me. I thought to myself, that the age he lived in and the age I live in were similar and that was disconcerting, but somehow it felt better to know that my fear was not new - not unique.

He, St. Augustine, lived in a time when the Roman Empire was falling apart. He lived in a time of lowered expectations, decaying social networks and a failed state. This drove St. Augustine to God. Sure, it was different, but how different from the time we live in? If in ages past the 'gods were born of fear', then it seems that Atheism and Nihilism are born of the broken promises of modernity.

And, so, here is my response to 'the world' and its attempt to rouse me out of my own dogmatic slumber, to wake me from my own ignorance:

To the vandal: "Thank you, in a way, for reminding me that the world is more than just the media 'cave' we have created for ourselves. And, please, never slash my tire again!

To my neighbors: "I am sorry for not having the courage to know you or to attempt to build 'social fabric' where none appears to exist. I am sorry I have let you down as a fellow citizen and I will try (as if trying is enough) to rectify this. I am still unclear as to how.

To the future: "the jury is out concerning 'the future'."