

The Littering Psyche

The word litter has a light touch to it.

It sounds like glitter- airy and inconsequential. Is that how it is for cigarette smokers who throw butts down on beaches and streets? That somehow a cigarette is not a piece of trash but can be tossed anywhere? Because it's paper and cured leaves it will break down and become non-trash at some point? It seems more likely that folks who toss butts on the beach, who throw down butts on shiny building floors grinding them with their foot, are operating from the same state of mind as that of people who toss trash out of cars. What is the littering psyche about?

Sometimes it seems so simple, but then I realize that I may not understand the full depth of the issue. For example, for a long time the world overpopulation issue seemed fairly clear to me. It was simply a matter of too many humans overtaxing resources. I now see the problem as much more complex. In some countries high birth rates are mandatory for family survival. Lack of health care and safe water means high death rates for children. Could littering be like this? Things at work that from my privileged position I am missing? You might think that people in a place like Costa Rica have a different littering mind than we do. Not really - trashing out the place crosses all cultures and economic station in life. Friends and I reached Dominical on the pacific side of Costa Rica in late December this past year. We were there to swim with dolphins and ride the waves. On January 1st hundreds of vacationing locals descended on the beach and within hours there was garbage strewn the length of the beach. By the end of the day we were ankle deep. The Costa Rican cultural littering psyche is even more trashed out than ours. From scattered coke cans on Market street in San Francisco to crushed paper cups in the mountains of Nepal and plastic bags choking fish off the coast of Chile, trash knows no bounds. Often the only difference between one neighborhood and another, between one society and another is the difference in infrastructure that has been set-up to deal with the mounting mounds of garbage.

A 1975 National Academy of Sciences study found that 14 billion pounds of trash mostly from merchant ships and commercial fishing are dumped at sea each year. Every year. Most of this is made up of long lasting plastic goods. Until recently the U.S. Navy has generally thrown all wastes overboard. This amounts to around a thousand pounds of plastic and polystyrene trash per day. A styrofoam cup produced and discarded around the time of Columbus could still be intact today. We accept as basic to the human condition the inevitability of littering. No wonder. Is it a simple matter of ignorance or something else?

It is said humans are one of the only species, besides pigs, who can live in their own shit. Or as Freud wrote, "everyones shit offends us but our own". Does this have something to do with it? How much progress is truly possible towards the protection of ecological systems and disappearing species given our modern day disposable psyche? Are we living in a state of amnesia? Have we forgotten as we trash the beaches, litter the air with particulate, soil the soil and foul the water

that we are essentially guests? It may be that truly dealing with the littering issue, finding out what is really going on, would help illuminate the hidden path to sustainability (the meaning of which most of us have only a vague idea).

Someone once asked if I thought it was just self-centeredness. I didn't know how to answer. I have rarely witnessed anyone tossing trash in their own path - it's almost always behind or to the side. Pretty self-involved I guess, but what is it all about? I know people who will carry around a plastic bag or container all day long until able to recycle it as they would glass, cans or cardboard. An approach from a different universe compared to the state of awareness required for a person to throw junkfood wrappers onto a sidewalk or a beach. Riding a bicycle in San Francisco is an obstacle course as streets are littered with glass shards from bottles being tossed out of car windows. I have a friend who gets a flat tire from glass punctures on average every other time he rides his bicycle. I do only slightly better. Maybe it comes down to simple respect - for fellow humans and place. Maybe it's a disrespect for oneself - a disconnection from the world.

I remember that September 23, 1995 was an attention getting beach clean-up day all around the country and widespread in the San Francisco Bay area. There is absolutely no end in sight to beach clean-up days. Members of the local chapter of the Surfrider Foundation haul out beach litter almost weekly. What are they thinking as they pick up other people's trash for hours? How do the people react who witness this going on? Do they reflect on their own littering past? Do they feel guilty for not being out there themselves or just appreciate the work of the litter pickers?

The efforts of those who clean beaches can do nothing about the trash underwater. Sylvia Earle writes in *Sea Change*, "Australia's Great Barrier Reef, the epitome of ocean wilderness in the minds of many, each year becomes the final resting place for tons of lost fishing gear and dumped trash. Plastic pellets, cups, bags, and bits sail the world on ocean currents, land on distant beaches and wherever they travel, provide a deceptive, lethal meal for birds, fish, turtles, and other sea creatures".

If everyone with a recycle psyche found a way to regularly talk with (not at) someone that litters within their view, within their place, we might learn something. Hope lies in the fact that once the non-littering psyche has been activated there is usually no return to an old state of awareness. For me it's enough to know it's possible one conversation can ripple through - having an effect on a growing pyramid of people. Enough pyramids could bring a qualitative shift in how we perceive ourselves sharing this great surround. Don't be bashful. Ask a nonthreatening question and find out some information. Tell them how littering affects you. One distinct way we can lessen the need for beach clean-up days is to initiate this kind of dialogue with people littering in our immediate environment. These dialogues are a great service to the ocean.

