Prologue - A Portland progressive goes looking for God

In my first letter I shared that the death of both of my parents prompted me to do some spiritual seeking. Long before that event my experience raising my family in Portland Oregon paved the way for my desire to investigate the nature of reality. Here is my recollection of that experience.

I moved to Portland, Oregon in 2004 to raise a family in a safe and wholesome environment. My wife and I were living in California with a 3 month old and looking for an affordable place to live with likeminded, middle class, college educated people in a smaller town. I had spent the prior decade living in the mountains of California as an outdoor guide and in that role felt a spiritual connection to nature. I loved hiking, biking and rock climbing and was ecstatic to find a community of people who not only valued protecting nature but could introduce me to new outdoor and nature based hobbies like fishing, birding, canoeing and mushroom hunting. It was a welcome change from the disconnected suburbs of California where housing tracks promoted themselves as “communities” and nature was at best an afterthought and at worst paved over. So it was with excitement that I discovered the Sellwood neighborhood just south of the city center of Portland, Oregon. The neighborhood was connected to downtown with a bike only, riverfront trail and the Sellwood neighborhood itself was a walkable, real community surrounded by parks and rivers. People lived simply and raised their families together. It was an ideal natural city setting. I felt grateful to raise my kids in such a wholesome and outdoor adventurous town.

I didn’t see it coming but over the 13 years we lived there the original nature and family based values of the Sellwood neighborhood morphed into a totally disconnected set of values that had nothing to do with nature or family at all. From 2004 to 2013 we bonded with neighbors planting trees, putting in crosswalks, removing graffiti and removing invasive species from the forests. We had community events like the Halloween "Monster March" where we celebrated the endearing phrase "Keeping Portland Weird". I showed my weird by towing a canoe behind my bike decked out as a pirate ship with my boys dressed as Pirates. It was a creative and wholesome form of weird.

During this time there was a slow and subtle shift taking place in the culture that was imperceptible to me at the time. It started with a subtle shift from local cleanup and natural improvement to more vague discussions about global warming. The argument was that unnaturally naturally high concentration of CO2 were on their way to destroy the environment. The fact that CO2 itself was not a polluting gas never came up. "Global Warming" was presented as an extension of my goal of preserving our local community so I supported it without question. This was the first subtle step from tangible, local action to a vague and yet dire call for a different type of action. It was no longer enough to simply improve our local community. As the focus shifted away from local nature issues, there was a problem with the phrase “ global warming”. Portland wasn't noticeably warming nor were many other parts of the world so the phrase “global warming” morphed into the more amorphous phrase “climate change”. With the new phrase any anomaly could be attributed to higher carbon dioxide without having to prove a cause based connection. Once again the change in terminology wasn't on my radar nor was the subtle change in focus from local action to global worry and I stuck with my tribe.

Within the Portland culture, the explorers Lewis and Clark were fairly prominent due to their 1805 adventure to the Northwest which culminated near Portland. Tied to there historical trip there was also a general respect for the Native Americans who once lived in the area because they managed not to destroy it, environmentally. Around 2014 there was a shift in the cultural emphasis in Portland away from the expedition of Lewis and Clark toward the Native American who had lived in the areas. The new focus was now about the past unfair treatment of these people and any other indigenous person which was promoted as the most important thing about them and elevated them into the category of celebrity. It overshadowed any other detrimental realities related to their society such as the constant state of war they found themselves in before the arrival of the European settlers where they tortured and burned other indigenous captives to death at public events attended by children. Chronic malnutrition, high early childhood mortality, and the degradation of women were all overlooked as the complex history was simplified into two groups. Indigenous people were presented as victims and early American's were labeled as oppressors. What might have been a weak argument in 1805 lost all connection to reality as hundreds of years passed between the early indigenous claimed to be victims and the early settlers claimed to be oppressors. They were all long dead and the people who lived now were 8 generations removed from the acts of their ancestors. Not only were neither the victim nor the oppressor alive but the lineage of each was incredibly muddled over time such that even the bloodline was incredibly diluted and mixed together. None of their claims came close to making sense to those willing to hear their explanation. But this seemed like just one more harmless and weird Portland thing.

Many of us who lived in my neighborhood were earnest and considerate progressive who knew that "keeping Portland weird" meant tolerating oddities and dissenting voices. We prided ourselves on being open to new ideas which seemed like a strength at the time. Plus it felt as if the institutions in the United States were so solid and established that they could withstand some push back. So we didn't bother questioning or addressing these small groups of people with strange views. They melted into the background in a place where on the weekends we joined bike celebrations with the bag-pipe playing unicyclist who dressed as Darth Vader. Portland was funky, eclectic and charming. But as the years went on the underlying cultural values I had moved to Portland for: cleaning up pollution, preserving nature and raising families turned out to be far more transient and unstable than I could have dreamed, as they were quickly replaced with a completely different set of values. What were once fringe ideas began to shift to the center of the culture. But each time it happened, we as polite neighborhood never pushed back. It was hard to articulate that there was a problem because Portland was supposed to be weird. Questioning strangeness wasn't in our nature especially when doing so was framed as going against being progressive.

Our reluctance to call out claims that were false paved the way for new, more extreme claims as the fringe elements started promoting themselves and the culturally acceptable narrative changed. Quickly the role model of the indigenous victim was replaced by a new narrative which was that other non-Indian people, who also had brown skin, were also victims even though these people had no significant history in the area. They were somehow now also given elevated status based on the color of their skin. There was no connection made to the environment, only vague reference to the word justice. There was also no venue to discuss or make sense of these crazy claims. Instead there was strong social push back to those who questioned the narrative.

It made no sense but worse still it quickly morphed into it's illogical extreme. If brown people were celebrities then black people were superstars. Again, there was no connection to the indigenous people who were revered for taking care of the environment. Also unlike the Native Americans, who could be honored through a recognition of their tribal status and perhaps given land rights, this new group was to be given immunity from the consequences related to their lawlessness. Quickly this odd idea and new group had far more importance to the central narrative of the Portland culture than the originally admired indigenous people. What we were left with was a value system related to humans that had nothing to do with families, protecting nature or enjoying the outdoors at all. Yard signs that once proudly declared our yards as "natural habitat "were displaced by "I believe signs" that stated the value of black lives. And it continued to morph as did the language used to describe us an Portlanders. We shifted from seeing ourselves as fun and funky progressives to people trying to dodge potential characterizations of ourselves as being intolerant or bigoted if we were to push back against the radical change in culture.

If the infatuation with the color of people's skin wasn't strange enough, another social group became the darlings of the local culture - the homeless. When I first moved to Sellwood, we had one resident homeless man named Perry who was tolerated by the community and in some cases commended for keeping a tidy bicycle trailer. He seemed harmless enough and added some spice to our little town. Over the years the handful of long-term local and relatively predictable homeless people were supplemented by far more homeless additions from outside of the community. We were already accustomed to some homeless in town so adding some more didn't trigger many alarms. But these new homeless people were unknown at best and sometimes mentally unstable, unsocial and predatory. They set up car camp sites next to the public softball field which became permanent fixtures. One burned out RV attracted 12 and in a short time open fire pits in the parking lot, piles of trash and people pooping in the creek became the norm. The incidence of bike theft in the immediate neighborhood spiked and people also woke up to find that the gas in their cars had been drained out by people who cut holes in their gas tanks to collect the gas. Meanwhile the homeless ran gas powered portable generators in the parking lot all night long. The online Nextdoor network had a slew of apologetically concerned mom's citing incidents of homeless men playing with themselves in the presence of children. Even Perry's behavior became more erratic as he threw parties all night long for his homeless friends on private, vacant land adjacent to homes. Meanwhile police were powerless to respond to the rise in homelessness due to the increased status of homeless people and a sudden, unexplained loathing for local police, which is a whole other story

Meanwhile, another development was brewing that was absolutely bizarre and totally unrelated to nature. It was the insane notion that people could select their gender the way you select what shirt to wear. It was hard to figure out if it was a joke or a test of gullibility but it certainly had nothing to do with the ideological reasons why I moved to Portland. I was a member of the Portland Unitarian Church's downtown location, a place that would become ground zero for all things logically insane. I was in the congregation in 2015 when we had our first transgendered speaker. A man who wore a dress and a pink shirt. Although strange he was polite and gave a respectful talk and we Unitarian's felt proud that we were open to all walks of life at our church. But then something strange happened in the Unitarian church, the church shifted from allowing

this man to speak to moving his strange cause into the center of our purpose. He wasn't just to be tolerated but instead to be celebrated and enabled. It got stranger still. Our congregation had just replaced our lead pasture with a Harvard educated black man who gave terrific speeches and felt like an asset until during one of his sermons he explained to us that our board had to be replaced because it had an unjust balance of people. The board was comprised of a caring group who had been in place for years and were responsible for his hiring and yet now they were no longer worthy of their roles, not based on their performance but based on the color of their skin or their self identified gender? He was mandating that the fringe become the center.

Amazingly, In my church and in my neighborhood it wasn't enough for our progressive and tolerant community to simply look the other way and let those with strange ideas about gender, race, homelessness and the police have their opinion. We were commanded to actively validate their delusions. And those who didn't comply we're not just labeled intolerant or bigoted but seen as violent. More amazingly, there was no end to the new strains of insanity continually being pushed on our community as gender categories blossomed into progressively obscure pronouns. We could see the destabilization of the progressive values in the strange and unstable "pride" flags that themselves constantly morphed into more and more chaotic images of disunity.

How did things get this crazy? What happened to my town and how did any of this relate to my original desire to support nature, raise a family and spend time in the outdoors? Why did I and the people of my community lose the ability to articulate the difference between tolerance and approval. How did new, crazy ideas get elevated to be equal to time tested values that defined our culture for centuries? Why were we all reluctant to speak common sense? How could our community's tolerance have been used as a weapon against us by groups that had nothing to do with nature and families and how come we couldn't say no? I stepped back for some objectivity on the dystopia unfolding in my community and decided it was time to assess my own values.

How could I argue that any of the crazy things going on around me were not right? If I was to make objective sense of the insanity I was experiencing, I suspected I needed to go back to my original assumptions. One of those was the assumption that nature was the pinnacle of spirituality, that God wasn't really a thing and that we humans needed to figure out our own values. Clearly in my community we failed to do so. Without guidance we crashed into a ditch and were actively digging a hole. After 13 years we moved out of the Portland area and back to a California suburb for the kids to go to an academically focused school. Away from the pervasive insanity of Portland I began investigating God and spirituality to see if I could arrive at some logical starting point. This time I wanted to be sure I vetted every assumption to make sure I wouldn't get taken into a ditch again. I would go on to spend over 3000 hours and 3 years investigating the nature of reality starting with the letter that follows.