A Hole in the World

The BP disaster reveals the risks in imagining that we have complete command over nature.

by NAOMI KLEIN

Everyone gathered for the town hall meeting had been repeatedly instructed to show civility to the gentlemen from BP and the federal government. These fine folks had made time in their busy schedules to come to a school gymnasium on a Tuesday night in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, one of many coastal communities where brown poison was slithering through the marshes, part of what has come to be described as the largest environmental disaster in US history.

“Speak to others the way you would want to be spoken to,” the chair of the meeting pleaded one last time before opening the floor for questions.

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And for a while the crowd, mostly made up of fishing families, showed remarkable restraint. They listened patiently to Larry Thomas, a genial BP public relations flack, as he told them that he was committed to “doing better” to process their claims for lost revenue—then passed all the details off to a markedly less friendly subcontractor. They heard out the suit from the Environmental Protection Agency as he informed them that, contrary to what they had read about the lack of testing and the product being banned in Britain, the chemical dispersant being sprayed on the oil was really perfectly safe.

But patience started running out by the third time Ed Stanton, a Coast Guard captain, took to the podium to reassure them that “the Coast Guard intends to make sure that BP cleans it up.”
can radically manipulate and re-engineer it with minimal risk to the natural systems that sustain us. As the BP disaster has revealed, nature is never as predictable as the most sophisticated mathematical and geological models imagine. During recent Congressional testimony, Hayward said, “The best minds and the deepest expertise are being brought to bear” on the crisis, and that “with the possible exception of the space program in the 1960s, it is difficult to imagine the gathering of a larger, more technically proficient team in one place in peacetime.” And yet, in the face of what geologist Jill Schneiderman has described as “Pandora's well,” they are like the men at the front of that gymnasium: they act like they know, but they don’t know.

**BP’s Mission Statement**

In the arc of human history, the notion that nature is a machine for us to re-engineer at will is a relatively recent conceit. In her groundbreaking 1980 book *The Death of Nature*, environmental historian Carolyn Merchant reminded readers that until the 1600s, the Earth was alive, usually taking the form of a mother. Europeans—like indigenous people the world over—believed the planet to be a living organism, full of life-giving powers but also wrathful tempers. There were, for this reason, strong taboos against actions that would deform and desecrate “the mother,” including mining.

The metaphor changed with the unlocking of some (but by no means all) of nature’s mysteries during the Scientific Revolution of the 1600s. With nature now cast as a machine, devoid of mystery or divinity, its component parts could be dammed, extracted and remade with impunity. Nature still sometimes appeared as a woman, but one easily dominated and subdued. In 1623 Sir Francis Bacon best encapsulated the new ethos when he wrote in *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum* that nature is to be “put in constraint, molded, and made as it were new by art and the hand of man.”

Those words may as well have been BP’s corporate mission statement. Boldly inhabiting what the company called “the energy frontier,” it dabbled in synthesizing methane-producing microbes and announced that “a new area of investigation” would be geo-engineering. And it bragged that, at its Tiber prospect in the Gulf of Mexico, it had “the deepest well ever drilled by the oil and gas industry”—as deep under the ocean floor as jets fly overhead.

Imagining and preparing for what would happen if these experiments went wrong occupied precious little space in the corporate imagination. Meanwhile, “would likely be sublethal” because of “the capability of adult fish and shellfish to avoid a spill [and] to metabolise hydrocarbons.” (In BP’s telling, rather than a dire threat, a spill emerges as an all-you-can-eat buffet for aquatic life.)

Best of all, should a major spill occur, there is apparently “little risk of contact or impact to the coastline” because of the company’s projected speedy response (!) and “the distance [from the rig] to shore”—about forty-eight miles. This is the most astonishing claim of all. In a gulf that often sees winds of more than forty miles an hour, not to mention hurricanes, BP had so little respect for the ocean’s capacity to ebb and flow, surge and heave, that it didn’t think oil could make a paltry forty-eight-mile trip. (In mid-June a shard of the exploded Deepwater Horizon showed up on a beach in Florida, 190 miles away.)

None of this sloppiness would have been possible, however, had BP not been making its predictions to a political class eager to believe that nature had indeed been mastered. Some, like Republican Lisa Murkowski, were more eager than others. The Alaska senator was so awe-struck by the industry’s four-dimensional seismic imaging that she proclaimed deep-sea drilling to have reached the very height of controlled artificiality. “It’s better than Disneyland in terms of how you can take technologies and go after a resource that is thousands of years old and do so in an environmentally sound way,” she told the Senate Energy Committee just seven months ago.

Drilling without thinking has, of course, been Republican Party policy since May 2008. With gas prices soaring to...
BP’s live camera feed, we can all watch the Earth’s guts gush forth, in real time, twenty-four hours a day.

John Wathen, a conservationist with the Waterkeeper Alliance, was one of the few independent observers to fly over the spill in the early days of the disaster. After filming the thick red streaks of oil that the Coast Guard politely refers to as “rainbow sheen,” he observed what many had felt: “The gulf seems to be bleeding.” This imagery comes up again and again. Monique Harden, an environmental rights lawyer in New Orleans, refuses to call the disaster an “oil spill” and instead says, “We are hemorrhaging.” Others speak of the need to “make the bleeding stop.” And I was personally struck, flying with the Coast Guard over the stretch of ocean where the Deepwater Horizon sank, that the swirling shapes the oil made in the ocean waves looked remarkably like cave drawings: a feathery lung gasping for air, eyes staring upward, a prehistoric bird. Messages from the deep.

This is surely the most surprising twist in the Gulf Coast saga: it seems to be waking us up to the reality that the Earth never was a machine. After 400 years of being declared dead, and in the middle of so much death, the Earth is coming alive.

The most positive outcome of this disaster would be not only a move to renewable energy but an embrace of the precautionary principle.

Following the oil’s progress through the ecosystem offers a kind of crash course in deep ecology. Every day we learn more about how what seems to be a terrible problem in one part of the world radiates out in ways most of us could never have imagined. One day we learn that the oil could reach Cuba—then Europe. Next we hear that fishermen all the way up the Atlantic in Prince Edward Island, Canada, are worried because the bluefin tuna they catch are born thousands of miles away in those oil-stained gulf waters. And we learn, too, that for birds, the Gulf Coast wetlands are the equivalent of a busy airport hub—everyone seems to have a stopover: 110 species of migratory songbirds and 75 percent of all migratory US waterfowl.

It’s one thing to be told by an incomprehensible chaos theorist that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil can set off a tornado in Texas. It’s another to watch chaos theory unfold before your eyes. Carolyn Merchant puts the lesson like this: “The problem as BP has tragically and belatedly discovered is that nature as an active force cannot be so confined.” Predictable outcomes are unusual within ecological systems, while “unpredictable, chaotic events [are] usual.” Just in case we still didn’t get it, a bolt of lightning recently struck a BP ship like an exclamation point, forcing it to temporarily suspend its containment efforts. And don’t even mention what a hurricane will do to BP’s toxic soup.

There is, it must be stressed, something perverse about this particular path to enlightenment. They say that Americans learn where foreign countries are by bombing them. Now it seems we are all learning about nature’s circulatory systems by poisoning them.

I n the late ’90s an isolated indigenous group in Colombia captured world headlines with an almost Avatar-esque conflict. From their remote home in the Andean cloud forests, the U’wa let it be known that if Occidental Petroleum carried out plans to drill for oil on their territory, they would commit mass ritual suicide by jumping off a cliff. Their elders explained that oil is part of ruiria, “the blood of Mother Earth.” They believe that all life, including their own, flows from ruiria, so pulling out the oil would bring on their destruction. (Oxy eventually withdrew from the region, saying there wasn’t as much oil as it had previously thought.)

Virtually all indigenous cultures have myths about gods and spirits living in the natural world—in rocks, mountains, glaciers, forests—as did European culture before the Scientific Revolution. Katja Neves, an anthropologist at Concordia University, points out that the practice serves a practical purpose. Calling the Earth “sacred” is another way of expressing humility in the face of forces we do not fully comprehend. When something is sacred, it demands that we proceed with caution. Even awe.

If we are absorbing this lesson at long last, the implications could be profound. Public support for increased offshore drilling is down 22 percent from the peak of the “Drill Now” frenzy. The issue is not dead, however: it is only a matter of time before the Obama administration announces that, thanks to ingenious new technology and tough new regulations, it is perfectly safe to drill in the deep sea, even in the Arctic, where an under-ice cleanup would be infinitely more complex than the one under way in the gulf. But perhaps this time we won’t be so easily reassured, so quick to gamble with the few remaining protected havens.

The same goes for geo-engineering. As climate change negotiations wear on, we should be ready to hear more from Steven Koonin, Obama’s undersecretary of energy for science. He is one of the leading proponents of the idea that climate change can be combated with techno tricks like releasing sulfate and aluminum particles into the atmosphere—and of course it’s all perfectly safe, just like Disneyland! He also happens to be BP’s former chief scientist, the man who just fifteen months ago was overseeing the technology behind BP’s supposedly safe charge into deepwater drilling. Maybe this time we will opt not to let the good doctor experiment with the physics and chemistry of the Earth and choose instead to reduce our consumption and shift to renewable energies, which have the virtue that, when they fail, they fail small. As comedian Bill Maher put it, “You know what happens when windmills collapse into the sea? A splash.”

The most positive possible outcome of this disaster would be not only an acceleration of renewable energy sources like wind but a full embrace of the precautionary principle of science. The mirror opposite of Hayward’s “If you knew you could not fail” credo, the precautionary principle holds that “when an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health” we treat carefully, as if failure were possible, even likely. Perhaps we can even get Hayward a new desk plaque to contemplate as he signs compensation checks. “You act like you know, but you don’t know.”