

# Humanifesto #2

Autumn equinox 2009

## **My grandson Rowan is weeping. I wonder: Am I too late to this wake?**

We're not going to make it, I suddenly realize.  
My grandson, nine years old and a nature buff, recently spent  
a half day weeping over a similar realization.

My optimism vanished about a week ago when I opened my mail  
from Reserve America, our booking agent to State and National Parks,  
and found a coupon for buying DEET.

To protect myself from bug bites when I am in the wilderness.

Our booking agent representing me, selling us passes to nature,  
our rivers, our forests--*Oh drop the drama, Destiny!*—are pimping  
heavy chemicals for Dow, Monsanto, whichever one it is...

*No one's going to read a rant, Destiny, so shape up.  
What purpose is it going to serve for you to fall  
into unredeemable depression?* Unless I want to be preaching  
to the choir, I had better explain.

DEET goes into the environment and rips  
at the web of life with both hands.

DEET goes into my body and the bodies of those  
near and dear to me—that grandson who had the veils torn  
from his eyes at 9—and lives in our flesh. HFEN (Health Funders  
Environmental Network) reports over 125 chemicals in our flesh  
that don't belong there, carcinogens from flame retardants

to derivatives of plastic products.  
The miracles of chemistry are killing us.

*(Is that a rant? Depends on what you know.)*

Our government requires that all mattresses sold in the US be sprayed with flame retardant, a powerful proven carcinogen that is one of the major chemicals found in our bodies. Plastics derivatives have also colonized our flesh. Pthalates to soften teething rings, nipples and rubber duckies, along with estrogen mimickers in our shampoo, bubble bath and beauty products, not only poison our flesh but have also reduced the sperm count of our grandsons and sons by half compared to that of our grandfathers. *They've counted. This is fact. Do the research yourself. This is the age of Google.*

*The cynicism of the chemical companies dazzles.  
Then depresses.  
How do we stop them?*

A male moth works his way upwind on the trail of his ancient prerogative, his obligation to his species, following molecules of scent pumped out by his female, the very definition of species. He encounters instead a molecule of DEET, subsidized (*pimped!*) by our State and National Parks booking agent.

Several years ago I visited one of our continent's fabled wilderness area, Algonquin Park in Canada. The night sky spectacle is still playing, above the Canadian wilderness, though I haven't seen it this way since childhood, innumerable stars of every magnitude, a sky blazing with activity. No queen's diadem comes close. On this night, packs of wolves howled to each other from proximate hills. Flocks of loons called, in haunting counterpoint.

My (then) sister-in-law, a sentimental woman, brought a bag of nuts to attract the local rodent population, perhaps to eat out of her hand. It began to dawn on me slowly. The blueberries that covered the island were ripe...and untouched. No little creatures came out to play with Snow White. Our chemical-based way of life had destroyed all life on the island, so remote we had to portage twice to reach it.

My nephew, an expert fisherman, couldn't even get a nibble.  
Acid rain?

When I pointed this out, family members hypothesized: that perhaps  
a wolf had crossed the ice this winter and eaten all the small creatures.  
*Perhaps a wolf did.*

The theories about where our frogs have gone, what has flattened  
our honeybee populations have finally given way to a simple fact,  
*everything else, being downstream, is a side effect:*  
We are poisoning the frogs and bees. And ourselves.

The chemical companies are winning, my friends.  
Today I am feeling a bit more optimistic. *Call it denial.*  
*Tomorrow I will say the chemical companies have won.*  
While we have made our little gestures to save ourselves  
and save the other species and the planet, the profit imperatives  
of the chemical companies are winning the day.  
My weeping grandson has the ill fortune to understand.  
We have lost.

Those straight lines along fencelines the chemical companies  
have taught our farmers and ranchers to spray with herbicide?  
—nice straight lines marking our roadside with blasted dead plants?  
Lodging in the flesh of the sprayer, the animals, the farm workers,  
the farmer's family, neighbors...

Chemical companies have convinced our food producers to lace their  
products with chemicals to gain benefits they desire like shelflife and for  
those qualities market researchers have found we consumers desire:  
chewiness, seedlessness, At what cost those seedless watermelons?

The chemical companies have convinced our highway departments  
that a blasted verge along our highways is necessary to our way of life.

This spring, during the recession and before the pump of government  
revitalization dollars back into our "infrastructure," (the highway  
departments being the ones with ready-to-build projects, "*green jobs,*")  
wildflowers bloomed along our highways again. The cost of keeping

an army of poison sprayers and mowers gave way to allowing the meadows of wildflowers to present their annual procession of beauty and aliveness, the web of life with honeybees and moths and little mammals... (*oh can it, Destiny! Nobody listens to these poetic flights anymore.*)  
*Nobody listens anymore, perhaps because there is no silence left to listen in.*

In New York State, the lands bordering our local interstate (*an oxymoron,*) I-86 as well as I-90, presented highway travelers with the glories of the seasons again, an annual procession of wildflowers hosting the honeybees, *yes the web of life, get on with it,* pleasing the eye at least while we rushed by at 70 mph, spraying noise and pollutants into the air. And yet resilient nature still stands up to the assault of the combustion engine. *It's the slow death versus the fast death.*

*Bring in the poisons, the all-out assault, results we can see.*

Once stimulus money flowed to the state highways department, the I-90 barbers, butchers and sprayers of poison returned to business as usual. The ribbon of life lining I-90 this summer has been reduced to blackened stubble. I-86, more provincial, has to wait in line apparently. The return of the mowing and spraying schedule on the Southern Tier Expressway around Olean and Bath has made only a small dent in nature's profusion. Only a few counties--more fortunate than others--have been empowered to reduce meadow to stubble.

*Hey it's just my job, lady.*

The tiny townships can flex their muscles again, spraying whatever it is Dow and Monsanto are pushing onto our rural roadsides in ditches that drain into our rivers and lodge—firmly—in our flesh and in our childrens' flesh.

*Name names, Destiny!* Old River Road along the Chemung River in both Chemung and Tioga Counties, NY, lined with withered browned blasted plant life. *And what of the fish, the bees and moths, the small mammals and reptiles?*

This early summer, in California, what did I find walking out

at the tip of Pt. Reyes National Seashore, out past the heritage dairies, past thousands of acres of organic pasture, the yellow lupine in full bloom, filling the air with its honeyed scent? In two hours, hiking over five miles lined with wild flowering shrubs, I saw one honeybee. One.

*Even my friends and family make excuses: You don't know what you're seeing. It was the rains. The drought. Leave it to the experts.*  
Denial.

*Go on, give them faces, name another of the places where death is being sown.* On Cole Road, outside of Northeast PA, I watched Eden Roc Farms spray their nice straight fencelines. The local golfcourse. *All good wellmeaning people. Blameless.*  
*Brainwashed by Dow. Poisoning their families' and my flesh.*

Down the road in Findley Lake, Mina Township, my brother's esplanade of fifty Scotch pines, planted forty years ago, dying from "an environmental insult" (Chautauqua County Soil and Water District's verdict.) Like salting the roads. Like spraying the roadside verge with poison. Along a road that was dirt until a decade ago. Thirteen of them dead and the rest going, a full assault now underway on their weakened state by fungi and borers, bringing down what has already been reaped.

I found purslane to harvest for my salads along the road in rural Mina Township. Two weeks later when I came back for another handful, they had been blasted, along with everything else growing in the ditch. The landowner, my neighbor, threatened by my foraging a handful of salad in the roadside ditch proximate to his acreage? The township doing due diligence against weeds on a tiny strip whose destruction started there and ended 100 yards along?

I'm ready to become an eco-terrorist.

Here, George Bush had it right with his wacky pronunciation: terre-ists. Terra for earth. Where I live, *terra firma*. Isn't being an eco-terre-ist better than being terminally depressed?

Won't my grandson feel better when his own children are weeping (...that they will never see a frog, that lightning bugs have winked out, that the apple tree doesn't bear apples anymore, the honeybees gone...) to know that his parents and grandparents marched into

WalMart and Walgreen's and Safeway and confiscated the DEET,  
the plastic nookies and nipples and *hauled them where, Destiny?*  
*(You're ranting again.)*

Into the landfill?  
Into the ocean?  
Into a sealed lead container in each of our basements?  
Into a hole in the backyard?  
To the toxic recycling centers...who put it where?

How can we wake up from this nightmare of the petroleum age  
and its lethal byproducts?  
*Did the discovery of oil unleash viral capitalism?*  
*Or are they coincident?*  
*The vision! The products! Ladies and gentlemen,*  
*let me introduce: The Modern Age!*

Too many of us still labor under the illusion that our world,  
our personal space, is inviolate at the borders of our skin,  
that nothing enters or escapes that we don't allow.  
My own husband, whose skin reacts savagely to insect bites,  
buys and uses DEET which I throw away as quickly as  
he buys it. He sniffs at the plant-based Buzz-Off I buy.

*If my husband doesn't get it, how can I expect anyone to get it?*

**What you do effects me,** I want to scream. Scrap PC correctness.  
It's just getting in the way, making divisions between hipsters,  
tree huggers, rednecks, loggers, the suits. We're all in denial.

What is the appropriate response to my grandson's tears,  
to the certainty of his children's tears?  
In the face of rampant cancers?

Terminal depression? Terminal militancy?

*Terminal,* my little voice whispers to me.  
*What are you going to do?*

Like Rowan, I weep.

I'm getting ready to get arrested for this, just to get your attention.

Why this is personal to me

I have multiple chemical sensitivities. The canary in our mine, I suffer disproportionately from proximity to pesticides, solvents, burning plastics.

When the burgeoning chemical industry got going, I was a child. The adults who cared for me inflicted all the miraculous products of the era upon me: nose drops, Exlax, hair permanents. No modern kitchen could be without aluminum cookware.

Carcinogens had not even entered the common parlance. Rachel Carson published Silent Spring in September of 1962. My mother regularly sprayed the patio before dinner with Raid. My father died of cancer at age 46; my mother at 60. Our oldest brother, the family's "certified" poison sprayer, at 60. My sister and her husband went to school in Niagra Falls, close by Love Canal. Three of their four children were born with life-threatening anomalies.

*What is mysterious here is why we don't get it, yet.  
And when we do get it, why we continue to put up with it.*

Yes, the chemicals industry is a multiheaded hydra, with a highly profitable franchise in every aspect of our lives. I once infiltrated the food, beverage and consumer goods industries with enlightened self-interest, to support my children as a single mom, and to see how the chemicals industry had wound itself into our consumer products. Perhaps, I naively imagined, to defuse it.

Expect my report on my years in the food industry soon, to join the reports of others describing it, with the goal of unraveling the deadly investment both the chemical industry and the multinational corporations have in our food system. Perhaps we can pursue a goal of returning to a relationship with our food that has only lapsed in the past fifty to one hundred years.

*That's what I think most days. Is it denial? Because other days, I think only that they have won. Is this a reality I can live with? Can you?*

# Humanifesto

is an occasional publication  
produced to influence the way you think,  
my dear friends, family and neighbors.

Please enter into a dialog with me.