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[Now You See It, Now You Don't](#)

BP... Oil... The Gulf Coast... Dispersants.
Seafood... Oil... Taste tests... Smell tests.
Minimizing the damage... Reality.
Unemployment... The economy.
The Environment... The fate of the earth.

Acy sticks in my mind. I cannot get him out of my mind. I don't mind him there. He is the one who touches me. "BP is trying to move out," he says.

"Oil is there," he says. "We have oil on the bottom of our waterways. 90% of the oil is still there. We need to make sure BP stays. Need to clean it up."

I have organized articles into files. I am periodically stumped not only by the amount of information coming from all quarters, day after day, faster than I can digest it, but also and more to the point, by the conflicting "facts" and opinions proffered. This is no tidy subject. And almost everyone seems to have a horse in this race. Almost. I think Acy does not. Well, of course he does, but his horse isn't hidden; it's in the forefront, where one can see it; difference is, it's not dragging him, blinders on, down the shortest, least irksome track to money. It's not distorting the depressing reality in which he finds himself.

Acy tells truth while he would be better served by fiction. "I worked in one part of this particular bay for two months, and we wear hazmat suits, we wear gloves, we taped up; they say oil's not there. The last day they got rid of me; I was working for BP; I found oil was on the bottom; I reported it to the Coast Guard; I reported it to BP, took 'em out there, showed 'em it was there..."

I have on this trip to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, been in the company of big brains, power, and unimaginable wealth. But I cannot get Acy out of my head. "NOAA keeps saying the oil's not there; everybody says it's not there: we know it's there...; this has catastrophic effects on our community, our way of life."

I sit at my kitchen table; it is piled high with papers, articles from newspapers and magazines, notes I took while in Baton Rouge with GIC (www.interdependence.org), notes I took while watching congressional hearings on CSPAN.

August 19th.

The hearings: Rep. Ed Markey, D-Massachusetts, chairman of the Commerce Subcommittee on Energy and Environment, spent the entire day gathering information from an "extremely distinguished group of witnesses..." Here is some of what was said.

Dr. Bill Lehr, from NOAA. He addresses the government's response to the oil spill. According to experts, the oil that was spilled can be divided into four basic categories, he says: "about one quarter of it was either recovered directly, was burned in situ, or was skimmed on the surface; another quarter either evaporated or was dissolved into the water column; another quarter...several times the size of the Exxon Valdez remains out there for cleanup purposes; and another quarter was dispersed into the water column. Part of that was through natural dispersion and another part through the use of dispersants." No fisheries, he assures us, are being opened until they meet the FDA's standards for health and wholesomeness.

If you don't think too much about that statement, it sounds as if the oil is, mirabile dictu, pretty much taken care of. And then the New York Times of August 24th tells us that indeed it is. "Undersea plume vanishes," it says, "degraded by previously unknown bug." Terry Hazan, a microbiologist and oil spill expert at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory tells us the "bugs have degraded the oil." But then, five or so paragraphs later, the paper says, "The bugs' success in degrading one plume does not invalidate fears of how the ecosystem may have reacted to the multiple invisible mists of oil that stretched out from the Macondo well while it was flowing, or the lingering taint of diffused oil and methane or hard-to-degrade, if nontoxic, petroleum components like asphalt."

Wait a second, there. Aside from "invisible mists" and "diffused oil and methane," since when is asphalt nontoxic? Do I want to eat asphalt?

Dr. Donald Kraemer, from the FDA. He addresses the safety of seafood harvested from the Gulf and talks about a "strict protocol for reopening closed fisheries" and the testing of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, PAH, "the primary contaminants of concern in oil." **(It is my understanding that they are potentially carcinogenic, mine, not Kramer's.)** Tested in seafood, he tells us that the levels are "well below the level of concern," and in fact, no higher than they were before the spill. **(Sounds almost too good to be true.)** The reopening protocol? 1: all oil from the spill is no longer present in quantities or forms that could contaminate seafood, 2: a scientifically valid sampling plan is agreed upon, and 3: all samples from the area have successfully passed all sensory and chemical analysis to insure that they contain no harmful oil residues.

Phew. (That's my "phew," not his.)

One of these men—I've lost track, I confess—emphasizes the rigorous training of those who smell seafood to detect danger. Smelling abilities are finely honed. These are no amateur noses. They are trained noses, and mind you, not every sniffer passes muster. There is sensory testing. Experts who go through significant training to attain skill in picking up odors of oil, of dispersants. Experts in The Smell Test. Truly.

Thus is our seafood deemed safe.

Yes, I am serious.

Dr. Paul Anastas, from the EPA. He addresses toxicity tests on dispersants and on oil plus dispersant in fish. The oil is moderately toxic, but the EPA found no excessive mortality, no excessive impact of dispersants.

How much mortality is "excessive?" I wonder. What is "excessive" impact when it comes to dispersants?

Clearly, they must keep at it, says Dr. Anastas. **Never can tell what the future will bring.**

On persistent questioning by Markey:

Lehr admits 75% of the oil is still in the environment but not available for testing. (In droplets, in air, etc.)

Markey: What % was actually removed by BP?

L: I'd have to redo calculations....

M: 10% would have been removed: Burning 6%, skimming 4%. 90% unaccounted for. That right? And an unknown amount on beaches...

L: Hard to estimate amount.

M: Twenty one years ago, 10% was determined to be recoverable at the Exxon Valdez spill. The amount is the same now.

L: Yeah, about same.

M: In my mind that is not a passing grade. Even using a 21 year old grading system, BP has not passed.

There is some back and forth about the algorithms' (the scientists' calculations) being released to the public. Lehr says it will take two months before numbers can be released.

Markey: The public has a right to know right now what is going on in the GOM. Two months is too long. We need the data to be released now.

Questions about methane: Will NOAA be taking methane into account? Would it take into account all the hydrocarbons involved?

Long talk about toxicity studies on Corexit.

Each of the components is low toxicity to humans. Someone says this.

But some may be toxic to fish. Someone says that.

If it's toxic to fish, and I eat it, then what?

Donald Kraemer: Corexit is composed of common household constituents, found in food and toothpaste and lip gloss. Unlikely to

bio-concentrate. **(I don't like that: unlikely.)** In parts of Gulf re-opened for fishing, no testing but belief that seafood is okay. **(I don't like that either: "no testing" or "belief"...)**

M: What about fish that swim from oiled area to non oiled area?

Lehr: Fish is presumed guilty until proved innocent, Has to pass tasting test, then goes to NOAA for chemical test. **(Tasting test. That sounds like the smell test to me.)** Testing in areas where oil has not been present. **(And that proves what?)**

M: Bluefin Tuna spawn in GOM, swim up to Georgia, ultimately migrate to coast of New England. How do we test them?

That question is blown off, as if frivolous, almost as if it is amusing.

Markey also notes that he wrote a letter to the FDA asking about the testing for heavy metals, arsenic, mercury. Has not gotten a response. It is six weeks since he sent the letter. When will he hear, he asks.

In a matter of days, he is told.

Who's on first?

M: Dr. Lehr, do you agree that the government can vouch unequivocally that the fish caught in state waters is safe to eat? As well as in federal waters?

Lehr: I would say that the fish caught is meeting all the standards that were developed by FDA and NOAA.

That's the problem, I think.

Dean Blanchard speaks. He is the president of Dean Blanchard Seafoods, the largest dockside shrimp broker in the United States and the third largest in the world. He is from Grand Isle, Louisiana. He guesses he has moved in his lifetime about 300,000,000 pounds of shrimp and never seen anyone get sick. He cannot get product liability insurance now. He's worried about customers getting sick from his seafood; he worries a lot about pregnant women getting sick. "That would be hard to live with," he says. He's more careful now than ever before about the shrimp delivered to him, but he's not worried about the shrimp he okays, he's worried about someone coming along and suing him just to "make money off this." He says he eats shrimp six, seven days a week. It's good, he assures us. If it isn't, he tells the fishermen who supply him, don't bring it to me.

That's where--after several hours of listening to men in suits and one woman--I saw and heard Acy.

I have read and read; I have done my homework. I am oppressed with information, much of which raises more questions than it supplies answers, much of which I cannot recall already, and I have only just read it. I am overloaded. As, I assume, we all are, or at any rate those of us who have made the attempt to keep up with, to understand all the varied aspects of this event.

Acy preoccupies me. He is the one who sits squarely before my eyes. It is he whose voice touches me. Acy Cooper Jr.

Mr. Markey tells us that Acy is a fisherman from Plaquemines Parrish and that he is vice president of the Louisiana Shrimper's Association and owner of a commercial shrimp boat. He wears no jacket, no tie, just a white short sleeved shirt. He is tanned, has graying hair, a graying moustache and beard, wears wire rimmed glasses, and chews gum all the time he testifies; he speaks in a thick, sometimes barely comprehensible Louisiana accent. His statement is almost monotone, but the more he talks, the more his eyes redden, glisten wet.

"They say the oil is gone. It's not gone. We have oil on the bottom..."

"These places we do have that's clean; we know it's clean. We worried about what comes in tomorrow or day after tomorrow that we can't fish any more." We want to make sure what we sell is good, that's the main thing. We have meetings. We discuss this.

"Now, we have to make sure BP stays in place as long as it needs to be... I tell you right now that they are trying to move out, and they are trying to go..."

"It starts August 16, the season, I went out; normally I catch a couple to 10,000 pounds of shrimp. I caught 500 pound. This season, \$1.25. These same shrimp, last season was around \$2, \$2.25/lb; they already went down one dollar. Now if I can't get the price for my shrimp, and I can't catch em, how am I going to survive?"

"One link is broken in this chain; we lose our industry. Who do we go to then?"

In the "disappearance" of the oil, we have the perfect metaphor for our mental machinations, those nifty tricks the brain employs to ditch that which is unthinkable: our self-destruction. Microbes ate the oil The water takes care of itself. (Don't even think about all the plastic and garbage down there.) Ditto for air quality. Poison in the air? If you can't see it, and you don't smell it, well, it just plain isn't there.

"They say the oil is gone," says Acy. "It's not gone. It's on the bottom. We can take you and show you. I brought the Coast Guard. I brought BP and showed 'em. You stir the bottom. It all comes up. So, whoever said it was gone, as you heard today. They said 75% was gone before. 90%'s still there. And it's going to come up on our shores eventually, somewhere, if not in La, somewheres else. Thank you."

This is the third of a series of articles I am writing (the first were Mother Earth, www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-benavi/mother-earth_b_676330.html and Dinner at Tara, www.huffingtonpost.com/rachel-benavi/dinner-at-tara_b_682750.html) after returning from a trip to Louisiana during which we, members of GIC, the Global Interdependence Center, www.interdependence.org were educated, more or less, about various aspects of the horrendous environmental catastrophe that has caused and will continue to cause so much damage and so much tearing heartache for so many.

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