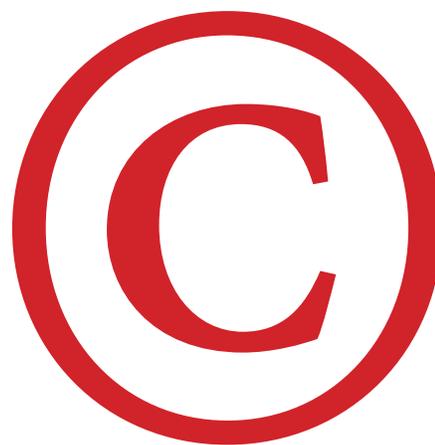


THIS MATERIAL
PROTECTED UNDER
U.S. COPYRIGHT
ACT TITLE 17





The Dimmitt tornado. Courtesy of the NOAA Collection

The Fallacy of Safe Space

David Keller

August 11, 1999, started out as a normal errand-study day. I had left my car with a mechanic, who was kind enough to lend me his, and headed to get some coffee. Tired from a long bike ride the day before, I was content to sit outside a café, sip a triple iced espresso, and look at people strolling in the sun. En route, I had listened to the local radio news. According to the National Weather Service, warm, moist air was moving in from the south, with colder, drier air coming in from the northwest. Afternoon thunderstorms with possible rain and hail were predicated, typical of late summer in northern Utah.

Gazing became procrastinating, and I turned my attention to thinking about strategies for revamping the environmental ethics course I was scheduled to teach autumn semester at Utah Valley State College. I needed to overcome a problem I had the first time I taught the course: the equivocation of the study of “environmental ethics” with “environmentalism” in the minds of the students. I teach in a very conservative community, and environmentalists are considered subversive to traditional values and a threat to free markets. In a previous course, I thought I would gain favor by bringing in a guest scholar to give a lecture titled “Mormon Sources for Environmental Ethics.” To my horror, as the lecture ended, a student approached the speaker, red-faced and angry, exclaiming, “The Church authorities have not issued any statement about this! To imply that Latter-Day Saints should be environmentalists or that Mormon doctrine implies environmentalism is disobedient!” Remembering that moment made me shudder.

This time, I thought, the solution was to explain that environmental ethics deal with human choices about the environment—choices that might be entirely oriented toward human ends. On this approach, one might hold that humans are disconnected or separate from nonhuman nature in some fundamental way and that the use of nature for human benefit is morally justified. Since developing an environmental ethic in a semester paper would be a major requirement of the course, it was important for me to make it clear that defending a human-centered position was entirely feasible.

To emphasize the idea that the Western tradition has been characterized by a pervasive anthropocentrism and that in one sense the study of environmental ethics is simply an investigation of this aspect of Occidental culture, it occurred to me that a brief historical account was appropriate. The Genesis creation myth in which God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” and the injunction, “Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth,” would provide a starting point recognizable to the students.

I planned to move along history by pointing out that ancient Greeks shared the Hebrews’ human-centered perspective. The *polis*, the political manifestation of rationality, separated Athenians from the chaos and barbarism beyond the city wall. Socrates, in fact, claimed that he had nothing to learn from the trees and open country outside the city. The idea of a human-nature divide reigned twenty centuries later when the French philosopher René Descartes asserted that his identity as a human being—the possession of an immaterial, eternal soul—had absolutely nothing to do with having a body. The views of John Locke would also strike a familiar tone to the students’ ears, since Utah politicians repeat over and over again a Lockean mantra when arguing against wilderness preservation: nature has no value until humans use it and therefore should not be “locked away.”

I paused and took a sip of coffee. While these ideas would no doubt resonate with most of the students’ own views, I needed to draw these threads together with a tangible, contemporary illustration. I recalled how I flew to Miami from Quito, Ecuador, shortly after Hurricane Andrew and was startled by the degree to which modern buildings can take a pounding: the sturdy, well-built homes of the affluent along the Atlantic coast remained intact, while entire neighborhoods of flimsy homes farther inland were demolished. I could use this illustration to point out that technology, in the form of building innovations, has furthered the notion of a separation between human beings and the rest of nature that extends all the way back to antiquity. Concrete, steel, and glass can withstand forces far greater

than the mud and timber structures of the past. Few people wanted to live on the Florida panhandle or in the desert Southwest before the invention of air-conditioning. Improved building technology has successfully distanced us from nature's capriciousness.

The sun disappeared behind a surprisingly dark cloud, and I took off my sunglasses. The formerly gentle breezes began blowing my notes off the table and flipping the pages of my textbook forward or backward twenty at a time. I closed the book and placed the glass coffee mug on a pile of papers.

Even if I succeeded in making the point that the study of environmental ethics was well within the purview of Western Christian culture, I still needed to make it apparent that the anthropocentric worldview is not the only alternative. Prior to Judeo-Christian monotheism and Greek rationalism, our nomadic forebears probably did not see themselves as apart from nature. They were always *in* nature. There was no wild or wilderness from which they shrank. With the advent of agriculture, linear furrows and regular inundations must have generated a sharp contrast from famine and flood. In a sense, humans became distanced from the rough natural vicissitudes with the advent of a sedentary lifestyle. A constellation of historical factors—agricultural, political, philosophical, religious, and so forth—converged to form the conception of human separateness from nature, a conception that was questioned by the greatest minds of our time.

At this point in the course, a student would invariably ask me about *my* stance on the issue. The notion of a fundamental human-nature divide, I would have to respond, was in my view a serious fallacy. But I would need to defend this statement in the light of the numerous technological advances I just pointed out that seem to distance us from the capriciousness of natural process. I wasn't quite sure what I would say.

Looking up, I noticed another thunderhead forming over the valley, growing gradually taller and darker. The underside of the cloud was black and muscular. The pouch-like texture was at once beautiful and ominous, yet there was no lightning or rain. The shifting breezes did not abate, and I decided to head up to the University of Utah library for the rest of the afternoon. I gathered up my materials, stuffed them into my briefcase and then headed back to the Audi borrowed from my mechanic.

Halfway to the University of Utah, I noticed a swirling cloud body in the shape of an inverted cone dropping from the black mamma above, directly over downtown Salt Lake City. The northwestern breeze coming off the Great Salt Lake must have

come into contact with the southerly wind. The convergence of these two surface air masses was creating a weakly rotating system.

The cloud looked like an inverted cone boiling with turbulence, swirling noticeably in a counterclockwise direction. It was an incredible sight, and I drove up the hillside to get a better look. As I drove, the cone became part of a full-fledged funnel cloud extending from the valley floor to the thunderhead. An enormous plume of swirling garbage was sucked into the sky. All the foam, cardboard, newspaper, and small leafy branches seemed suspended, circling slowly above the city. It was one of the most awesome and beautiful things I had ever seen. It looked like a tornado, although I hesitated to assume it was anything more than an enormous dust devil, since Utah is not known as a tornado state. As far as I could tell, the funnel appeared to be stationary. I figured that if I saw it moving toward me, I'd simply drive away.

In the few minutes it took me to reach the top of a residential area northeast of downtown known as the Upper Avenues, which has commanding views of the Salt Lake Valley, it had grown completely dark. Debris rained out of the sky. I turned into a dirt pump station parking lot that joggers and walkers use to access the open mountainside above the houses. Blowing dirt erased any view beyond the edge of the parking lot. The car was engulfed in a sandstorm. A violent blast came directly at the windshield as I watched the debris go from paper to two-by-fours. A large piece of plywood flew straight at me and then spun suddenly off to the left, like a giant Frisbee. Aware that somehow I was suddenly in the funnel, I shifted the car into reverse in an attempt to escape.

I had backed up only a few feet when an electrical wire fell across the roof of the car, accompanied by a loud crash. I stopped. Two feet behind the car lay a splintered timber power pole. A transformer hit the ground, spilling out fluorescent green fluid. Relieved that the power pole hadn't crushed the car, but afraid that the wire on the car was hot, I quickly pulled forward, and the wire fell to the ground. The surge of wind quickly waned as hail began to fall. The violent gust had lasted for only ten or fifteen seconds. After five minutes, the hail slackened, and I got out of the car to look around.

The power pole I had almost backed under had been snapped off about ten feet above its base. Nearby, two other power poles had been downed. Criss-crossed wires covered the ground. A portion of a roof had landed on the bare hillside. The trunks of dozens of trees were snapped, and others were uprooted and plowed over. Debris was scattered everywhere. Lawn chairs, shingles, a charcoal grill, a

swamp cooler were just some of the random items decorating the parking lot. Part of a roof hung in a pine tree. Half of one house was gone. Tangled venetian blinds dangled in shattered windows. A large wood beam punctured a huge glass window and black smoke rose above downtown.

As I surveyed the aftermath, I was struck by the incredible folly of my actions. I assumed that when I saw the funnel cloud developing over Salt Lake City, I could observe it in its full sublimity from a safe distance—like the confident observer in David Casper Friedrich's painting *The Wanderer*.

People started to come out and look around. It was dead calm until sirens began to wail. A man who was inside his house when the tornado hit said the sound was deafening. Strangely, I didn't remember any sound.

An employee of the local water utility emerged from a windowless brick pump station with a look of bewilderment. He called the central office on his two-way radio, and we learned that, according to preliminary police reports, the tornado developed southwest of downtown, traveling northeast, skirting Temple Square (for Utahans, an example of God's will or sheer coincidence, depending on perspective), and advancing up the hillside to my viewing spot. The water utility employee reported that the pump station was inaccessible due to the downed power pole and requested that the power company be dispatched to remove the obstruction.

As I surveyed the mayhem the tornado wreaked on this carefully manicured and ordered upper-class subdivision, it occurred to me that our success in increasing the amount of physical space that we can manipulate has promoted a false sense of security, a hypertrophic confidence in our inventions. This actual physical space corresponds to the socially constructed ideal of safe distance or safe space. The concept of safe space is the basis of distinguishing the human from nature, a central feature of the Western worldview.

Yet not all of our beliefs fit reality. Safe physical space, the tangible, technological product of rationality, is conflated into the *concept* of safe space. Once this concept works its way deep into our cultural psyche, we are poised to posit a fundamental boundary between humanity and rest of nature. As the tornado demonstrated, there is no such boundary. The human-nonhuman divide is fallacious, and I am guilty of this erroneous conflation.

I stared at the roofless house. Through a front window, I could see kitchen cabinets and the refrigerator. The open sky above cast a gray light throughout the rooms, not normal for the inside of a house. Its roof lay at least a hundred yards away, to the west. The direction of the blast that ripped the roof from the house

moved east to west, but the direction of the blast that came at the car moved west to east. I had been inside the vortex. The “safe distance” I thought I had—several miles—suddenly became the distance between my face and the windshield. The car protected me from the blast, but the threshold between the glass shattering or not must have been precariously thin. If the car had been perpendicular to the blast rather than nose first, the window might not have held.

After several minutes, I became aware of voices around me. Somebody said that one of us should go into the house to look for survivors. Somebody else said the family was out of town. Another suggested organizing cleanup crews. I headed back to the pump station parking lot to see if the downed power pole had been removed, so I could return my mechanic’s car.

As I walked, weaving a serpentine path through broken branches and scattered shingles, I admitted to myself that for good or ill, inventing and making defines humanness. Technology is intrinsic to being human. Constructing houses, building dams, playing musical instruments, practicing medicine, and catching flight are integral aspects of the human identity. Obviously, we cannot forswear technology, but we need to recognize that one thing humans cannot make is an inviolable safe space. At best, we may temporarily distance ourselves from the wild forces of nature.

Near the pump station, I came across an utterly shredded copy of the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, a peculiar find considering the overwhelming probability of finding the *Book of Mormon* or *Doctrine and Covenants* instead. Along with many other ancient Indian texts, this scripture describes the Hindu god Shiva’s dance as perpetually sustaining the cosmos through simultaneous destruction and creation. As I recalled the image of the beautiful and awesome plume rotating over the city, with newspaper, dust, and leafy branches fluttering in a Dionysian frenzy, it occurred to me that the tornado was like Shiva—or *was* Shiva. The same ecological processes that drive evolution by natural selection also cause extinction. Like Shiva’s dance, this dual effect of natural process is inextricably interconnected. They are two manifestations of the same underlying phenomenon.

Back at the pumping station parking lot, workers were cutting the power pole into five-foot sections and piling them aside. As I got into the car and turned the ignition key, it occurred to me that even I, who have devoted considerable time and energy reflecting on the human—more-than-human dynamic, fell into the trap of committing the safe space fallacy—almost fatally.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to William Alder of the National Weather Service for explaining the unique physics of this tornado and to my auto mechanic, Jim Keller (no relation), for not being angry when I told him I had driven his Audi Quattro into the vortex of a tornado.