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## Big Impacts of Small Inspirations

Contribution to GTI Forum [Big History and Great Transition](#)

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The subject of Big History is, unfortunately, too big and too abstract to be very useful as we look for solutions to our modern social and environmental dilemmas. Instead, I would argue for a much more specific look at history and a more recent period of time as the basis for the most fruitful inquiry.

Marvin Harris, with his materialist anthropology, showed that the cultural practices of peoples were in response to their conditions of life. When the buffalo—or the mammoths and mastodons—were vastly abundant, indigenous peoples killed them almost as indiscriminately as Buffalo Bill and his kind, driving hundreds over cliffs to die and consuming only a small portion of their meat or hides or bones. They learned to think of the seventh generation when scarcity demanded it and the great herds were gone. They killed few species because their numbers were small—in general, they were not overpopulated as we are—and their weapons weak by comparison to the guns the Europeans brought here. But indeed, they learned—as we must, and in quite specific ways, to respond to their actual changing conditions, not as a result of the grand theories of their priests and chiefs.

The principle of Occam's Razor suggests that we consider the simplest answer to a problem as most likely to bear fruit. Hence, I want to suggest that most of our rampant materialism, which, without question, is changing the climate and destroying the biosphere, doesn't really come from "the patriarchy" or some grand "Western modern/technological/industrial civilization" or a will to dominance, but more likely from our common desires for convenience, and the fact that our society makes it so easy to consume.

Some may seek the megalomania that money offers—e.g., Donald Trump—most of us are simply looking for easy ways to satiate our basic and baser desires, and avoid working too hard at repetitious tasks. We choose cars over walking or public transit because they are often more convenient (easy) for most of us, not because we are primarily seeking power or prestige. I know almost no one who bought a car for those reasons rather than price or safety or some similar factor. And, I would argue, we are looking for a bit of beauty and novelty in our lives. Yet our system makes it possible for some to accumulate vast wealth while others must work longer and harder, and in more grim circumstances. So for the poor, the car becomes more necessary and less fun.

None of this is helped by population growth, as we saw in an [earlier GTI discussion](#). Just as a growing population and a shrinking resource base drove the once peaceful Puebloans to internecine warfare and toppled civilizations from the Middle East to Mayan Mexico, so does ours lead to crowding and the loss of desirable positional goods like beachfronts, lakeshores, and the like (and to biodiversity) to fierce competition over land, driving up costs and shedding our “lumpen” into the mean streets and tragic encampments. The vast inequalities of wealth do this too, of course, but so does crowding and the depletion of resources by rich and (in rich countries) poor also. It is the wish for convenience that cause our masses to rise up angry every time the price of gas goes up while ignoring climate change (at least until it, too, seriously inconveniences them).

So what can be done? I would suggest we spend less time on “big” histories and more on the little histories that have actually made a difference. I think that the real benefits of nature and the appeal of natural beauty are a starting point that can appeal across class, race, gender, and nationalistic lines. More green space, more encouragement of children to put down the devices and play outside, more attention to the beauty in life that can make us pause in wonder and awe, slow down, and reflect on our glorious world.

We have sufficient evidence that these things can improve both our health and happiness and make us kinder to each other. An experiment in Philadelphia found that simply cleaning up garbage and squalor and replacing it with parks and gardens brought a sharp increase in

happiness, lowered crime and homicide rates, reduced fear to venture outside and mental illness, and led people to trust each other and work together.

As we look forward, I would suggest we study the amazing steps forward we made environmentally in the 1960s and 70s, the era I examine in my new film, *Stewart Udall: The Politics of Beauty*. We can learn the specific strategies that led us to cleaner air and water, slowed the use of deadly chemicals—leading to amazing comebacks by bald eagles, pelicans, and other birds—protected large swaths of wilderness, public land, shorelines, and scenic treasures. We can learn, too, the mistakes we made then—the Interstate Highway System, the big dams, the destruction of passenger rail as the car became King. We can learn that in addition to protest marches, it was the slow, patient work of legislation by people like Udall that helped pass on to us much that makes our lives worth living.

As for “big” history, I suggest we look at the miracle of evolution that gave us so compelling (and surprisingly universal) a sense of beauty. Our genes learned that such beauty was life-affirming, and we have come to feel genetically that wounds on the earth—oil spills, strip mines, garbage dumps, etc.—are like wounds to our own flesh.

Love of natural beauty compels us to a more caring ethic in a way that grand abstractions never will.

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## About the Author



John de Graaf is a filmmaker, the author of three books, and an environmental activist. He has produced several films about sustainable agriculture and about the perils of overconsumption. His latest film is *Stewart Udall and the Politics of Beauty*.

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## About the Publication

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