

# Technological Arrogance, Plus Ignorance, Spells Disaster

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CONCORD, Mass. — *"You can't stop progress, but progress can stop you."*

--Anonymous

The Sudbury River eases northward through gently treed slopes to its confluence with the Assabet where, together, they form the Concord River, whose terminus is the Atlantic Ocean just beyond historic Newburyport.

The tranquil stream seems almost unchanged since the memorable moment, over 200 years ago, when British soldiers and local Minutemen exchanged across its banks the shot that began the American Revolution.

With one exception: About two weeks ago, as uncontrolled flames were beginning to consume the nuclear reactor at distant Chernobyl, we were warned that fish from the Sudbury were contaminated by mercury and unsafe to eat. During this same period the most advanced machinery of technology--our space-seeking rockets--were exploding with grim regularity.

These varied events, seemingly so different in nature and consequence--were linked by a common flaw: the blended ignorance and arrogance that has led us to believe ourselves the master-controllers of a new technological age. We have made the life-threatening error of believing that if we were clever enough to invent new masterworks of technology, we were also capable of controlling them. Several thousand years ago, the King of Senna made the same kind of error when he sought to build a tower to the Kingdom of God. His project was ended by divine intervention. We can expect no such barrier to our own self-destructive works. Reason, self-restraint and humility are the only elements of our defense. And they seem to be feeble ramparts against the greed-fed ego of modern man.

This pessimism was fortified by the reaction to the most spectacular of our recent technological disasters--the catastrophe at Chernobyl. Scientists, businessmen and politicians tumbled over each other in the rush to reassure us that our reactors are much safer. We use water, not graphite. We have structures to contain unexpected radiation. Our procedures are more sophisticated and our technicians more skillful. Anyone who believes that must also believe that the Challenger returned safely to Earth after a triumphant mission.

There is no such thing as a safe nuclear reactor. Or, more accurately, we can never be certain that a nuclear reactor is safe, anymore than we can be sure that the brakes on a new automobile will never fail.

Unlike a single car, a reactor can kill thousands of people and produce radiation whose contamination is of totally unpredictable scope, duration and consequence. This immense destructive potential is "controlled" by machinery of mind-boggling complexity. More ominously, they must be managed and observed by human beings, whose ability to make wise judgments and avoid careless or mistaken acts will occasionally be impaired. The perfect machine--were there any such thing--built and managed by imperfect people, is always--perhaps inevitably--subject to malfunction.

Given this reality, the continued use of nuclear power plants is a form of insanity. We are deliberately embarked on a course that some day, some place will kill a lot of people and lay waste some portion of the Earth. And we are doing this despite the fact that we have far less dangerous means of generating electric power.

Let us hope it will not take another disaster, or series of disasters, before we take the only sensible course: Prohibit the further use of a source of power whose destructive potential cannot be fully controlled. That includes dismantling plants already in operation. It will cost a lot of money. But that's the choice--"your money or your life."

And what about the fish in the Sudbury River? They, like the plant at Chernobyl, are the lethal products of technological arrogance. Our ingenious, well-meaning scientists have contrived dozens of methods for protecting us from hazardous chemicals, airborne hydrocarbons, the waste materials of human life--and they don't work. Water supplies across the country are now contaminated. And we are ignorant of the extent, nature and future consequences of this poisonous spread.

Why have we done this? And why do we allow it to continue?

We have abdicated power over our future to the experts. And, for the sake of our children, we must take that power back. Our society does not even have a forum to discuss the possible results of technological change, nor any center with the power to reject or re-direct that change on behalf of the general welfare. By failing to establish such a mechanism--a body chosen, directly or indirectly, by the people--we have placed the fate of the planet in the hand of technical specialists who, however brilliant, are unqualified to decide questions of the common good. They, and those that hire them, do what they are trained to do while the rest of us appear content to be silent, disenfranchised witnesses to approaching desolation.