

Iridescent Swirls of Death by Anne Bradshaw

Like rainbows that fell to the earth, iridescent swirls of oil on the ground can be so beautiful that sometimes I take pictures of them. As a child, I always wished that there could only be more of the beautiful eddies morphing around on the ground. While the rain falls, the movement of the oil has been known to mesmerize me to the point that I lose my perception of time.

Just minutes after midnight on March 24, 1989 the Exxon Valdez super tanker collided with a reef in Prince William Sound of Alaska. Like poisonous blood from a dying, putrefying animal, oil spewed and flowed from the smashed ship. Over eleven million gallons of oil contaminated the life, air, land, and waters of the sound (Goldshore 32).

I imagine oil spills to be somewhat cartoon-like. A thick, oozing, black blanket of death starts to cover everything within its reach and then stretches out for more. There seems to be an endless supply of the goop. The oil is insatiable and continues seeping off in every direction it can, reaching outward and downward whenever possible. The water forces the oil to stay on top while gravity prevents it from rising. These seem to be the only forces fighting the oil.

The captain of Exxon's Valdez oil tanker, Joseph Hazelwood, was a known alcoholic at the time of the crash. He was not in control of the ship because he had put the vessel's third mate in charge since Hazelwood himself was intoxicated (Goldshore 32). It was careless of EXXON not to have greater accountability among their crew members and careless of Hazelwood to take his responsibilities so lightly. Hazelwood and the company alike have expressed remorse, but the effects of the tragedy remain. Needless to say, there were few things done correctly in this situation. Suffering resonates as a result.

Animals don't understand oil. It is not a part of their natural lives. In a spill, turtles come up for a breath of air, and, instead, thick oily sludge slides down their nostrils, and their entire face gets a waterproof mask of oil. Birds swoop down for a fish and experience an unexplained feeling of being weighed down by the oil that stuck to them during their dive. Seals, fish, plankton, turtles, whales, plants, humans, and ALL life is dumbstruck by this unexplained killer.

The area of Alaska's shoreline that was directly covered with oil in 1989 was the size of two Chesapeake Bays (Okey 34). Some sea bird populations were cut nearly in half: "oil killed 250,000 waterfowl and choked countless marine mammals and fish... 2,800 sea otters perished; more than a dozen killer whales from a resident pod disappeared" (Fonda 103).

I was not allowed to drive the lawn mower yet. My big brother had not been allowed to drive the lawn mower until he was thirteen, and I had to wait until the same age to make things "fair." On one day, when we were both too young, we began to snip at the ground with scissors because we wanted so badly to cut the grass. I felt very prepared to become an excellent lawn mower driver, but I had to follow the rule. Whenever my brother would ride the mower, I would run around the yard helping by picking up sticks and toys. One day we decided to siphon the oil out and do an oil change just like the real men did. Somehow we managed to avoid drinking the oil in our makeshift procedures, but the transfer was still unsuccessful. The oil came spewing out of the tubing and went into the

ground. We knew that we had made a mistake and that the oil was bad for the earth, but we had no idea that oil had the power to kill.

Mistakes small and large should be noticed and accepted as reality. Only by standing by our actions and taking care of their results can we prevent tragedies from reoccurring.

The damage done by the Valdez spill was so vast that our planet may never fully recover. Odey describes the situation like this: "Adding insult to injury, one tragically oiled cove after another metamorphosed into war-zone-style symbols of dominion and the mechanistic techno-fix, as men in white hard hats spewed from helicopters and barges in a frantic attempt to 'fix' nature by urgently spraying hot liquid from giant hoses onto the living membranes of submissive coves." Some of the procedures designed to "clean" the oil only spilled more chemicals onto the screaming earth.

Sometimes decisions that have enormous impact ignore logic. If the right person has not signed the correct paper and sent it to a certain office with a particular seal of "officialdom," no action can be taken. In the case of the Valdez spill, many illogical procedures surrounded the clean up. Sometimes important cleaning procedures were ignored altogether. Research teams of ecologists and divers from the University of Alaska say that it "turned out that cleanup was often not documented or coordinated in any organized way. Opportunities for learning were lost in the jumble" (Okey 2). For many reasons, our government, as well as Exxon and other involved parties, could not get their act together. The consequences will remain forever.

Throughout the legal struggles to find some sort of settlement, Exxon always seemed to have some weak excuse to exempt them from the charges they faced. They tried to play the word game and find loopholes in the laws to avoid paying as much money as they were asked. Exxon would question standard procedures and courtroom rules only to be reminded that the rules were the same as always. They often whined excuses, saying that they had already been "sufficiently punished" (Goldshore 33). The destruction caused by the spill of 1989 is immeasurably immense. That event forever changed Prince William Sound, and so forever changed the world. The effects of the spill are being felt in countless dimensions and can never be put completely right.

It is foolish to think that any dollar amount can ever be equal to the damage that was done to the precious, life-giving Earth. During the trials dealing with the Valdez oil spill, "The algorithm of law was being used to convert lost ecosystem 'value' into U.S. dollars" (Okey 4). But what is a dollar? Can the worth of a piece of the earth be measured at all? Somehow, Exxon convinced the right people in high places that there is a monetary value that could be placed on the damage done by the bleeding oil tanker. The new amount as of 2001 lay far below the original demand for five billion dollars. Exxon will eventually pay "at most, \$1.65 billion" (Goldshore 36).

Exxon Chairman Lee Raymond calls the spill, "a tragic accident that the company deeply regrets" but also complains that the punishment that Exxon received was "excessive" (Dinesh 1). Exxon goes as far as to blame the rising temperature of our planet for some of the damage, which others see as a direct result of the spill. Many of the animals killed were only passing through, never again to return home. Despite the fact that countless research studies have shown that the effects of the spill are being felt to this day, according to Exxon in 2001, "the environment in Prince William Sound is healthy, robust and thriving" (Pearce 4). Although it is true that there are "signs of healing in the Sound" (Fonda 103), the recovery process is long and may never truly be over. Research done

through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shows that many species of birds that were injured by the oil spill show little to no signs of recovery (Pearce 4). Perhaps this is what Exxon means when it says, "robust and thriving."

Hiding as a coward will not help the future. It is likely that some other unfortunate portion of our beloved planet will one day have to endure a situation similar to that endured by Prince William Sound. By studying the past, we can hope to optimize the future. In ignorance, we are left unprepared. Even today, Exxon will not stand up and accept blame for its mistake. Upon visiting the Exxon website, you find it impossible to locate information about the tragic Valdez oil spill. In fact, when you enter a search for the word Valdez, the site asks you if you have made a spelling error. How shameful that Exxon cannot even tell the public the facts. By not talking about the event, perhaps the company wishes to forget the eleven million gallons of oil that were poured into Alaskan oceans. But nobody who saw the mess will ever be able to ignore the hellish scene they witnessed, and no part of the natural world that is yet to recover will ever be as it was. Nature remembers.

Works Cited

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