

C Preparing to read

NOTES ON THE READING

In this selection David Shapiro takes a close look at the *moral legacy* we leave future generations, that is, the moral lessons that we will be remembered by. He writes about a trip he took with his father and a friend in a Winnebago, a huge expensive motor home. During the trip, a tragic incident at a national park leads him to look at his culture and wonder about people's failure to take personal action in an emergency. Looking back at the incident many years later, he remembers two gas stations located at the entrance to the park. He views the two stations as a *metaphor* for the divisions in society. The clean, modern, safe but more expensive gas station is a *corporate franchise*, one branch of thousands owned by a major oil company. The other is poor, dirty, and falling to pieces. Which of the two gas stations do you think is struck by tragedy in the story—the *affluent* franchise or the poor, independent one?

(Note: Words in italics are from the reading.)

PREVIEWING THE VOCABULARY

Before reading, preview the vocabulary in context. Read these sentences based on the text and choose the best meaning for the underlined words.


- 1 We have completed filling our vehicle's huge 32-gallon tank, have stocked up on peanuts and gum, and paid.
 - a. checked our supply of
 - b. eaten our entire supply of
 - c. purchased a good supply of

- 2 Just as my father angles the Winnebago onto the road, an explosion rocks the gas station. Through the corner of my window, I see a fireball engulf its white clapboard office.
 - a. hit
 - b. surround
 - c. rise above

- 3 In his nervousness, his jaw is clenched and his hands are tight around the steering wheel.
 - a. open
 - b. relaxed
 - c. closed tightly

- 4 I see many similarities between this microcosmic memory and the macrocosmic legacy we as a people will leave behind.
 - a. small / larger
 - b. very old / more current
 - c. important / unimportant
- 5 Bhopal, Chernobyl, the Marshall Islands—time and time again, less-developed places bear the brunt of the technology that sustains more developed ones.
 - a. never receive
 - b. suffer the bad effects of
 - c. have to wait a long time for
- 6 Were its owners cutting corners on safety in order to keep up with their corporate-supported competitor across the street?
 - a. posting rules of safety
 - b. following safety rules too closely
 - c. trying to save money by ignoring safety
- 7 It appears to be a peculiar feature of our shared moral legacy that bad things seem to happen to underprivileged people, whether through negligence, conspiracy, or just plain bad luck.
 - a. people who are not paid minimum wage
 - b. people who are in the wrong place at the wrong time
 - c. people with a lower standard of living or fewer rights
- 8 Who knows where the underground tanks of petroleum are located? Who knows if the whole station might suddenly ignite?
 - a. start to burn
 - b. start to sink slowly
 - c. disappear suddenly
- 9 Our silent response to atrocities, from the turn of the century to the dawning of the new millennium, bears mute testimonial to our lack of the moral virtue known as courage.
 - a. fearful acts / clearly denies
 - b. good acts / clearly announces
 - c. wicked or cruel acts / is silent proof of

- 10 We don't lose sleep over the hole in the ozone, or the destruction of the rain forest, or how to dispose of nuclear waste because we know that someone is making everything all right.
- get rid of
 - increase the amount of
 - decrease the amount of
- 11 I recognize this attitude as a healthy component of our survival instinct and one that enables us to carry on so we can make additional choices that sustain us.
- part of our will to live
 - part of the law of the world
 - part of our need to take care of others

 **Follow-up** Check and discuss your answers in pairs or with the class.

D Reading for overall meaning

Read the article at a quick but comfortable pace. Then answer this question:

Today, is the author comfortable with the decision his father made at the gas station years before?

A Gas Station Burns in the Forest: Illuminating Our Moral Legacy

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David A. Shapiro

About 300 yards outside the entrance to Glacier National Park in Montana are two gas stations, one on either side of the two-lane road. They have been strategically placed so tourists can fill up before entering the park and refill upon leaving. The one on the left is a national brand, the one on the right, a local Mom 'n Pop cut-price place called Y-Pay-Mor. We, of course, have chosen 5 the national brand—quality, my dad likes to remind me, is worth a few pennies extra. Besides, the cut-rate places don't take credit cards, and gasoline, for convenience and accounting, is always purchased by credit card—that's just how it's done.

We have completed filling our vehicle's huge 32-gallon tank, have stocked up 10 on peanuts and gum, and paid. With my father behind the wheel, me in the passenger seat, and my best friend lounging at the motor home's kitchen table, we are just beginning to pull out. It is almost dusk and we are in a hurry to find our reserved campsite before it gets dark.

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Just as my father angles the Winnebago onto the road, an explosion rocks the gas station across the street. Through the corner of my window, I see a fireball engulf its white clapboard office. I perceive the image of a man inside completely on fire, staggering toward what had been the door, and rolling on the ground, over and over. A woman comes running from the back, pointing at the right side of the building where the restrooms are. She waves her arms at the blazing structure and cries, "My baby! My baby is in there!"

By this time, we are on the road and pulling away. I look at my dad. "Did you see that?! Should we stop?"

He is fighting to disbelieve what he only half-saw. The expression on his face is one I've never seen before. His eyes are wide; they look simultaneously young and ancient, somehow. His jaw is clenched and his hands are tight around the steering wheel. He is slightly hunched over, as if urging our vehicle forward. He focuses on the road ahead, hits the brakes as a man in jeans and a T-shirt sprints across in front of us and toward the fire, then accelerates again.

"Dad! There was a guy, I think, on fire! Shouldn't we do something?"

My dad says that he didn't see any guy and even if there was, there's nothing we can do. It's too dangerous and there are other people already on the scene. It's better we should hurry up to the park entrance and tell the rangers.

When we get there, a small crowd has assembled and is looking back at the plume of black smoke that is now funneling upwards. One park ranger is inside the toll booth, talking hurriedly on the phone. A second stands outside with his arms folded, watching the smoke rise, looking bewildered. My father explains to him what has happened. The ranger gratefully acknowledges the information, tells us it will help, and says that we should move inside the park so emergency vehicles can get through.

We drive off toward our campground. I ask my father if we should go back after we get set up.

"We've done the best we could do," he says. "The right people have been informed. It's under control now."

That's the last we ever talk about it.

Did we do the right thing? What is the moral legacy of the choice we made? How does it mirror the moral legacy of our time? As I recall what happened and as I consider how our society will be remembered, I see many similarities between this microcosmic memory and the macrocosmic legacy we as a people will leave behind.

I begin by considering the setting, which strikes me as a particularly apt metaphor for this day and age—two gas stations outside a National Park. Note that one of the stations is a corporate franchise; it's a clean, well-lighted place. The other, unsupported by the conglomerate, is a dilapidated shanty. The former serves well-to-do customers, people who tour National Parks in Winnebagoes, who pay by credit card, who think that a tidy bathroom and monthly statements of account are worth the extra cost. Customers at the latter pay by

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cash, they drive beat-up station wagons and camp outside, in tents or under the stars. To them, gas is gas—why pay more?

Tragedy strikes. Tragically, it strikes the less affluent station. Hasn't this been the trend throughout the 20th century, particularly when technology is 60 involved? Bhopal, Chernobyl, the Marshall Islands—time and time again, less-developed places bear the brunt of the technology that sustains more developed ones.

Why did Y-Pay-Mor and not our station explode? Were its owners cutting corners on safety in order to keep up with their corporate-supported competitor 65 across the street? Or were they simply not as well-informed as to the dangers? Perhaps they didn't have the resources—educational or financial—to guarantee a sufficient degree of safety. Or maybe they were just unlucky. Again, it appears to be a peculiar feature of our shared moral legacy that bad things seem to happen to underprivileged people, whether through negligence, con- 70 spiracy, or just plain bad luck.

Next, I see us driving away—in a motor home, no less—as a man burns and a mother screams for her child. Conceivably, we could have stopped and done something, but we didn't. I consider all the reasons that modern society doesn't stop and do something and the explanations seem identical. 75

First, we are afraid. Afraid for ourselves, of course, but even more, we are afraid for our loved ones, and most of all, for our children.

My father has his son next to him; his son's best friend—the child of his own dear friend, a youngster he has known since the boy was born—sits nearby, and across the street, not 50 yards away, a gas station office has exploded. He 80 doesn't know why, or what might happen next. My father is a physician, not an engineer. Who knows where the underground tanks of petroleum are located? Who knows if the whole station might suddenly ignite? Maybe both stations share some sort of underground storage—the entire road could blow. At the very least, we are carrying 32 gallons of gasoline ourselves. We've got to get 85 away, and get away quickly. We must remove ourselves and our families from any potential danger.

One doesn't have to sift carefully through the legacy of our time to see how fear has colored our moral choices. Our silent response to atrocities, from the turn of the century to the dawning of the new millennium, bears mute testimo- 90 nial to our lack of the moral virtue known as courage.

Of course, we also don't know how we can help—if at all. We're too late, we don't have the skills, nothing can be done. My father says that if the man were on fire, no one could save him. We don't do anything because we think what we could do won't be enough. What difference will it make anyway? 95

As a society, we take this same moral stance. Our legacy is one of inaction—not simply through lack of compassion, but through lack of knowledge. We're paralyzed because we feel powerless. We're silent because we feel dumb. If no one can do anything, why should we?

Besides, we do what we can. We report the accident to the proper agency. We 100

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let those in charge take care of things. After all, that's what they're there for. We get out of the way so they can do their jobs. Those people are experts; they know what they're doing. If anyone's in trouble, they'll see to it that people are cared for.

Isn't this the code of behavior that most of us have accepted? We assume that the experts will solve our problems for us. We don't lose sleep—not too much, anyway—over the hole in the ozone, or the destruction of the rain forest, or how to dispose of nuclear waste, because we know that somewhere, somebody is making everything all right. We just have to let them know what's happening, and they'll figure it out. As a result, we can look back and know that—despite our inaction—we did our part, small as it was. But our descendants—if there are any—what will they think? Will they look at our failure to take personal action and assume that we didn't care?

But we do care. We just have to get on with our lives. It's getting dark. We still have many miles to go. We've never been here before. We're tired and hungry. How can we help anyone when we're in this state of mind? We've got to get our own act together before we can help others, don't we?

I know that many people nowadays—myself included—often feel this way. I recognize this attitude as a healthy component of our survival instinct and one that enables us to carry on so we can make additional choices—moral or not—that sustain us. But I wonder what our world would be like if this survival-first message was the moral legacy of Socrates or of Martin Luther King, Jr., or of Gandhi.



Follow-up Now answer this question:


Today, is the author comfortable with the decision his father made at the gas station years before?

E Reading for more detail

Read the article a second time. Use the questions to read for more detail and to bring your experience to the reading.

- 1 What can we conclude about the social and economic status of the author's family?
- 2 Which element of the explosion was the most frightening for you to read?
- 3 How do we know that the father was aware of the explosion? Can you think of a situation where you had the same nervous reaction as the father?
- 4 Would you have made the same decision as the father to drive on when the explosion occurred? Explain.
- 5 How did you answer the question at the end of *Notes on the Reading*? Were you right?

- 6 What two major reasons does the author give for not stopping to help in the tragedy? Which one seems like a better reason to you?
- 7 Does the author's explanation of their inaction seem like a logical analysis or just a rationalization to you? Explain.
- 8 What world problems do we leave to the experts? To what extent do you agree with this attitude? Explain.
- 9 *Key words* Make a list of six words and expressions that you feel are important to the reading. Be ready to explain what each word means and why it is important.

 **Follow-up** Discuss your answers in pairs, in small groups, or as a class.