

# People Fear That Which They Are Ignorant Of

An essay by David Petersen

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**M**y first experience with nuclear power occurred when I was only five years old. The year was 1969. Our family had recently moved to Virginia, where Dad had a job as a field engineer working on the construction site of one of our country's earliest nuclear power plants. My father was an enthusiastic, young, newly-produced graduate of the Civil Engineering program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison campus. It was then his practice, as it is today, to closely study any issue before formulating his opinion. Thus, as he gained knowledge of the subject, Dad grew comfortable—even excited—about the merits of the new field of nuclear energy. He was at that time in Virginia, at the Surrey Nuclear Power Facility on the James River, to fulfill a six-month field assignment for his employer. How could my kindergarten-intellect know that Dad was at the ground-level of what has since mushroomed into one of the most hotly debated issues of modern man? And, who would have known that the underlying problem with this issue was merely a fear of the unknown?

Dad's part in the Virginia project was completed after six months, so we next moved to Massachusetts. The company Dad worked for was headquartered in Boston. Boston, it would seem, has been a center for critical thinking in our country since long before the Revolutionary War. And along with critical thinking comes another segment of society that apparently chooses "their side" of an argument out of fear. Or out of ignorance. This choosing-of-sides on any given issue is to blame for many of society's rash actions. It appears that many people go off "half-cocked" about an idea, without ever really learning anything about it. Perhaps, over the natural course of time, society would shift from the social consciousness of the late sixties to the scientific awareness demanded by the seventies and eighties.

This whole issue of nuclear power is just one symptom of a larger problem. People form opinions and make decisions without becoming

knowledgeable of the related facts and information. For example, whenever the scientific community publishes a report on the draining of our natural resources, they are met by opposition from segments of the general public.

But what happens when the endangered species become the extinct species? When there is no more oil, coal, or natural gas left in the earth's crust—what then? When times get tough, when storms and earthquakes destroy all that man has built, does society then look to God for the answers? These are the times when the rejected ones are suddenly called upon to perform miracles. But we cannot replenish those resources from the earth which took millions of years to be formed. We have no guarantees that we can resist the violence of a natural disaster.

Our only hope, as a society, is to use the intelligence and the resources which we have at our disposal. Instead of rejecting those whose ideas are different from our own, we should see what there is to be learned from each other. We need to study the issues. We need to formulate intelligent, informed, knowledgeable opinions.

What I know about nuclear physics could probably only fill an index card. But I do know that, properly utilized, the harnessing of the power of nuclear fission can relieve the great strain which our society has placed on our limited natural resources. People must first, however, learn to control their fears. It has been said that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." I propose that ignorance—the lack of knowledge—is the beginning of all fear.

Man was afraid of fire, until he learned to control it. Fire then became one of man's most useful tools. The automobile met considerable opposition when it was first introduced. Now man has become dependent on automobiles for his daily transportation needs. Today, it would seem, man is afraid of nuclear energy. We should therefore follow the advice "*know nukes,*" rather than heed the protest "*no nukes.*"

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Since Dad had specialized in the area of structural concrete, he eventually took another job offer with a different company.

Through the course of my childhood, it would seem that man had gradually resolved his great fear of nuclear energy. We had learned how to use it for powering our great cities, rather than demolishing those of our enemies. But when I was a sophomore in high school, all of that progress in man's thinking came to an explosive halt. Three simple words changed the way all of the world viewed the atom. *Three Mile Island*. Beginning at 4 am. on Thursday, March 28, 1979, the attention of every person, in every town, in every corner of civilization was focused on Middletown, Pennsylvania. Focused on the worst—was it the first?—major commercial disaster involving a nuclear power plant. Not more than an hour away, my family was only cautiously concerned. Dad knew the facts, knew that we were in no immediate danger. But outside the realm of knowledge, the world of fear was in a state of chaos and panic. Could

adequate pre-planning, based on the knowledge of the actual facts, have caused society's reaction to have been different?

Years later, man has made much progress. Sure, there have been a few other nuclear plant problems since then. But there is still hope. The percentage of problem occurrences is low, due to the vast amount of knowledge which we have gained from our past failures. Similarly, this is the story of mankind. We try, then we fail. After we fail, we try again. We learn—and we improve—with each step in the process. If we still hope to be here when this planet has yielded all of her resources to our demands, we had better pursue all of the options available to us. I say this responsibility starts with knowledge. My father taught me to study the issues in order to form an intelligent opinion. Will society follow this sound advice? Can fear and ignorance be usurped by confidence and knowledge in the minds of mankind? I hope so. Our very survival may well depend upon it. ■