

Michael Bettencourt

Collected Essays: Volume 5

Block & Tackle Productions Press



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Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt

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To María Beatriz - always in all ways

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Writing for a Living

I am now working full-time in a communications department for a major university in New York City. What this means is that I write every day, which, for me, is just great.

When I interviewed for the position, the vice president for development (one of my “clients”), asked me why I would want the job—after all, he said, it’s not very challenging. My answer was straightforward: it’s a job writing. Not arranging someone’s schedule or ordering food for events or arranging travel for a cranky executive, but just writing. At this point in my life, why wouldn’t I want to do the thing I like to do, even if it isn’t high-level and influential?

He was right to ask, though. Much of the writing I do disappears almost as soon as I produce it: the press release, the alumni profile, an account of the graduating seniors’ dinner, the thank-you letter for the president, the email follow-up message for the annual fund appeal letter, the grant proposal (or the report to the granting agency). This is the nature of the job: each day requires a fresh dose of Facebook postings and Twitter feeds and Flickr uploads and blog postings, all of which disappear into the digital heavens and are replaced with new material the following day.

I can understand if someone told me that they would consider this a kind of writing hell, being part of an industrial process churning out content, the AP style guide being the only aesthetic benchmark. And at times it feels exactly industrial—how could it not?

But I have found that turning out good industrial content is not a species of automatic writing. Even though I am writing a press release for a graduation dinner, I still have to struggle to make the narrative flow, to work in the quotes without showing the seams, to find verbs that evoke images, to give the event the aura of importance it has for the people organizing it. In short, I try to tell a story rather than do stenography.

Where I do even more struggling is in solicitation language—the email blast for a donation, the appeal letter, the grant proposal. After all, every Oliver-Twistian plaint for begging for money has been voiced, but every linguistic effort to beg for money has to be fresh and unminted. It has to hew a line between fawning and informative, it has to have a human voice (even though it’s a mass-produced article), it has to tell a full story in one hundred words or fewer, and it can’t be filled with what Steve Krug calls, in *Don’t Make Me Think* (an indispensable book

about web design), “happy talk,” inconsequential self-congratulatory nattering. (Think of the “About Us” pages on websites.)

The same challenge comes with writing the gracious thank-you letter for the president, the cover letter for the report, the blog post about some boring lecture. I look first to the verbs—I constantly try to de-Latinate my verbs, going for one- to two-syllable Anglo-Saxon choices, and find verbs that aren’t used often, staying away from “provide” and “offer” and “ensure” and “enable”—these are happy talk verbs. I ban adverbs and only sparingly—sparinglly—use adjectives, and then only when the adjective adds something worth noticing about the noun. I try for a spare line but not a dry line, more than “just the facts, ma’am” but less than fulsome kowtowing.

So far, I have liked this challenge of working within constraints to produce instrumental prose that is useful if not deathless. I have read discussions about content vs. art that have tried to liken content to the plastic resins injected into molds and extruded as interchangeable products and art as something not-that. But I tend to take a catholic view of what I do. People read what I write (even if they don’t know I wrote it—we don’t get the byline), it serves a purpose greater (or at least bigger) than myself, the people who like it find me out to tell me, and at the end of the day I have been practicing the thing in life I love to do most (except for perhaps cooking dinner together with the Marvelous María Beatriz).

(April 2016)

Why I Love My Wife

In many of my Scene4 essays, I mention the beneficial influence of the Marvelous María Beatriz, my lovely wife. She's the one who reminds me to be a human being, to focus on the light rather than the murk, and who retains the gift of wonder when, as a social work director at a major children's hospital, it comes to dealing illness and grief and suffering. She is a truly remarkable person.

For eleven years, she lived and worked in her native Argentina as a nun in the Catholic Church. She did this during the time of El Proceso, the Dirty War, and while the Church afforded some protection against the depredations of the junta, it was still a dangerous time for anyone who, like her, believed in liberation theology and who worked among the poor in the wastes of Patagonia or in the mountains of Córdoba. She worked with sheep herders to form economic cooperatives and with disaffected young men and women who saw little future for themselves in the generals' paradise. Even before her stint as a bride of Christ, she had entered the shanty towns in metropolitan Buenos Aires (which are still there today) to do what work she could to save people from immiseration and hopelessness.

What I have half-jokingly called her "nunness" is threaded throughout her being—wearing the veil is not truly necessary to declare the workings of her spirit. For the MMB, the veil is also her corporate closed-toes shoes in the hospital or, as in her latest work, the dress she wore for her naming ceremony in a small village in The Gambia (more on that in a moment). It is the outward sign of the inward grace.

She eventually left the church (I wish I could say it was her love for me that flipped her, but that wasn't the case). She left in part because the Church and her Catholic values parted company, the former's sclerotic conservatism in direct opposition to her values of mercy and forgiveness. She also left because, as a 31-year-old woman (she had entered the order at the age of 20), she had a strong self-knowledge of her spiritual identity but less self-knowledge about herself as a woman living in the modern world subject to the draws of the flesh and the lures of modernity.

She managed to come to the United States on a religious visa, and for several years did odd jobs to keep body and soul together. Eventually, she graduated with an MSW from Boston University, figuring that social work was

the vocation closest to what she had been doing before, and since 1997 has steadily worked her way north in terms of increasing her scope of responsibilities and knowledge, currently working as a director of social work and patient care coordination at the Morgan Stanley Children's Hospital of New York, which is part of the omnivorously expansive New York Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center.

We met in 1998 in a situation where, if there had been a 15-second delay, our paths would never have crossed. Two years later we married in the United States, with another marriage in Argentina a year later for the South American crowd. I can say without irony or false modesty that marrying her is the best choice I have made in my life. The journey with her up to the day this is being written has been chock-full of love and adventure and satisfaction.

Her latest enterprise is working with a non-profit organization located in The Gambia, West Africa, called Starfish International. Founded by Mam-Yassin Sarr in 2006, Starfish works to give Gambian girls the chance to grow up to be women capable of economic independence and imbued with an ethic of giving back. María Beatriz met Yassin through connections at the hospital, and for ten days this August, she and several fellow employees along with two theater professionals have been using Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed to help the girls create portable theater performances about domestic abuse that they will perform in other locations in the country.

This is what I love about what she is doing. One of the things she found in the Church, at least for a time, was community, people engaged in a common endeavor to make life better for people whose lives needed improvement and, in the process, refine one's own spiritual nature towards more compassion and action. She has missed this for years, not being able to find a community that feeds her soul in the right way.

Starfish has become the community she has sought. Gambian culture is a culture of hospitality and sharing, of celebration and ceremony, and she feels that the work she can do there, even if limited in time and scope, is work worth doing, something that she not does always feel when she tells me the daily stories of the infighting and politicking going on in the hospital.

This is what I love about her and why I will continue to love her forever. She has a wide heart and a sharp mind, an expansive compassion allied with well-thought-through strategies. She can feel, but she can also do. I've seen this in action as I've watched her solve problems brought to her by her staff, the ability

to deploy this while telling them to do that and how to follow-up properly when “that” and “this” are done, all rolled out with the confidence that comes from long-practiced expertise.

I love the spirit of her spirit, I love that she still believes in spirit, in soul, in powers that guide us if we open ourselves to them, that she believes that things happen for a (good) reason and moves forward as if that were the true case of things. I love that she loves her wine and her food (being of strong Italian background, how could she not?), that she launches herself into hobbies that square with her spirit (weaving, jewelry-making, cake decorating), even if that means finding more storage space for supplies and machines, that she loves to dance even with her quirky sense of rhythm and sing with her deep tango voice. She has presence, she is present, she can be prescient—who could not love a person like this?

We live on the second floor of a house, and a short while ago, she took a tumble down the stairs to the front door—a result of work stress, over-hurrying, and a heel catching on the step runner. Luckily, nothing more than a scrape on her right shin and a moment of fright. Dust her off, and away she went.

But the incident shook me. I could not stop thinking about what could have happened—after all, she’s not a trained stuntman, and there are any number of bones that could’ve been snapped and gruesome injuries sustained. I could not stop thinking about what it would have been like to lose her. The thought was terrifying; the imagined loss was horrible. The barbed feeling eventually dulled, but it has not gone away, and it keeps me attentive to her so that I don’t lose sight of her in the midst of my own moodiness and scrabbling.

I know at some point that the loss will come (for both of us), and when it comes, I want a better curation of the event so that the going-away is gentle and sad and sufferable. But in the meantime, I have the gift of her in my life, a gift that really does keep on giving, a gift that I will keep receiving with great thankfulness, like water to a thirsty man.

(August 2016)

Crap Detection

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I have decided to clean things up. For years, the arrangement of “stuff” in the apartment (the tchotchkes, books, pictures, furniture, and so on) has been good enough, slapdash but clean. For instance, our cookbook section has gradually sprouted printouts and articles, not always tucked in, and the arrangement has become haphazard, with books out of order or just tossed back wherever they can fit. But it feels used by humans, part of a lived life.

But “good enough” has shifted.

This impulse also comes from dust. This old house sheds dust as old houses do abraded by time; add in two cats’ worth of cat hair, and all surfaces, no matter their geometries, quickly become dust algal mats, choking off sheen, color, texture. One can, of course, “dust” on a regular basis, but no one these days dusts on a regular basis—and the quick return of the dusted-off dust prompts a deeper philosophical question: why the hell hold on to stuff that performs no useful function, exists primarily for display purposes, and takes away time from actual living (especially when one should consider every day the last day of one’s life)? Give dusting the dust-off.

So, the MMB and I have launched a clean-up campaign, which, though it began in just tidying up, has now shape-shifted into something more interesting about possessions and being possessed, the physical/virtual/digital, aging, and the lightness of being.

For me, the campaign began with my books. Pre-digital age, I amassed reference books that helped me with my writing—dictionaries, quotation collections, a good thesaurus, and such. Now that much of what I would excavate from them I can find online, I haven’t referred to my references in years, though I have dutifully lugged them along and set them up in Ikea bookshelves where they attracted dust and no attention.

Other books, too—ones I meant to read but haven’t (won’t ever—be honest), ones I read and re-read and palimpsested with notes, a few really nice books (e.g., a weighty collection of Richard Avedon photos) skimmed through once and then tucked into obscurity, some just total unintriguing mysteries as to how I came to have them. All taking up room, all collecting dust, all mostly unhandled and disregarded.

Time for them to go.

Now, I have been one of those who has exalted the book for its superior technology: does not require a battery, can be read in any light, portable, durable, tactile. (Its only drawback is searchability.) Then came e-readers and e-books, and the collected works of Dickens suddenly became a slate weighing only ounces holding the collected works of Dickens. (I recall a *New Yorker* cover that showed two metal bookends on an empty shelf in an empty bookcase holding a Kindle.) These days, I do almost all my important reading on my Surface Pro 3: magazines through Zinio, books through Amazon and B&N, academic PDFs through Zotero on Firefox using Drawboard. Note-taking is still not easy, but there are work-arounds, and they work well enough.

Operating this way is both a solution and an advancement. I feel no nostalgia for the book, feel no loss in its physical absence. Friends have chided me from several angles about the decisions I've made. One argues that nothing can replace the sensuality of a book. I agree. But reading on a reader has its own sensuality, and, more to the point, the book stripped down to its words visible on the screen clears out all that sentimental underbrush; undistracted by look, feel, heft, smell, I can concentrate on the interchange between the words and my ideas. Let a thousand fondlers of books bloom; I prefer the distilled simplicity of the appearance and the weight of the tablet in my hands.

The digitized book also links me to the world, through videos that accompany the words, through slideshows that illustrate a process, through high-resolution images that I can expand to see detail no museum guard would ever let me see. Who would not want to embrace these possibilities?

Arguments like these are pointless because they are based on a false binary: digital/virtual [abstract] vs. "thing" [concrete]. Because we are humans, every "thing" in our lives has a virtual element in it, a kind of ghostliness or spiritness that comes out of how we interact with the thing. As just one instance of what I mean, Karl Marx noted that a commodity, a thing, also had embedded in it all the social relations that went into the production and promotion of that thing. One can't strip away the thing's layers to find those relations in some kernel at the thing's core, in another "thing." Marx noted that it is the humans who, in their interactions with commodities and with each other, embed the virtual relations in the commodity. The inexpensive shirt made in Bangladesh has in it, as Marx called it, a "phantom-like objectivity" made up of everything that went into creating the system that put the material into the hands of the Bangladeshis

who made the shirt. To my cat, this phantom is not there because my cat has no capacity for metaphor. But for humans, born metaphorists that we are, the shirt carries the phantom; in fact, it's the phantom that gives the shirt value and makes it exchangeable in a market. To my cat, with no sense of this value and with no concern for markets, the shirt is an excellent piece of bedding for an afternoon nap—and nothing more.

Virtuality is how we make sense of our world since everything humans sense about this world is through metaphor, a transmutation of the procedures of physics into brain-stored meaning. Religion is a primary example, as is art, but humans infuse everything they do with “phantom-like objectivity” so that the time they spend in their surroundings can yield a “meaning” that validates the time they've spent in their surroundings. “Meaning” is not truth. Meaning is just personalized narrative coherence; it doesn't have to be testable or provable for it to have great power. Humans hunger for things to make sense, and by God, they will make them have one even if they don't!

But the power to virtualize our realities—to metaphor them, so to speak—has morphed because of the power of the technology we use to create metaphor and extract meaning. Marx felt that, in a commodity, the actual and virtual were more or less in tandem; the technology for extracting the virtual and making it manifest as value was mostly the human brain.

But now we have de-coupled actual and virtual to the point where the “phantom-like objectivity” more and more becomes the ground of being and source of meaning (and profitable value) for humans.

Just a few examples. The (supposedly) coming Internet of Things (IoT), where devices share information with one another and with monitoring organizations (companies, consortia, and so on), will surround us with a shadow infrastructure of frequencies that track (and try to anticipate) our intentions and needs, and mimic human sentience. The IoT becomes something like a new part of our brain, post-cerebral cortex, extra-cranial but also tightly meshed with our inter-cranial synapses as it feeds information to us (and our money-earning monitors—let's not get too “gee-whiz” utopian and forget the IoT's origins).

The expansion of “platforms” for ingesting “content” is another example, a world where everything becomes a screen for display (a notion that Jaron Lanier has talked about, specifically about how “screens” differ from “pages” which then shifts how information gets transferred and taken in).

It's not the thing but the experience of the thing that matters most: that seems to be where we are, we corporeal animals housing, and housed within, a sparking brain pumping out dreams.

(July 2015)

Ω

Moving to the Dark(ish) Side

Innovation Hub is on my short-list of to-be-listened-to radio programs. Each Saturday morning at 7 AM, I make my coffee and sit at the kitchen table to sip both beverage and insight. The Marvelous María Beatriz is still snoozing, and the cats are curled up into their own pensiveness.

This show was about “celebrity, the changing nature of,” and it featured a segment with *Variety*’s Andrew Wallenstein and Tubular Labs’ Allison Stern. (Tubular Labs “tracks 1.5B videos across 30+ platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Vine, Twitter, Yahoo, and AOL; as well as analyzes the engagements of 400M+ video viewers.”)

The focus of the discussion was how YouTube and other digital platforms have disrupted the Hollywood process for celebratizing people. Someone sitting at a computer can now become a superstar millionaire. Case in point: PewDiePie, otherwise known as Felix Kjellberg, is best known for playing video games before a massive audience; according to *Forbes*, he makes \$4 million a year.

Those who name themselves artists may not want to become celebrities, but all artists want to become known for what they do, and they would like that “knownness” to afford them a decent life, no matter how they define that. I would argue that PewDiePie is living the life every artist would like to have: well-paid for doing what he loves to do and the focal point for millions of people’s attention and, at times, admiration. The fact he achieves this by playing video games online for an audience is irrelevant: he entertains and pleases, and reaps his reward for doing so.

I am thinking about these topics more seriously of late because, for the second time in 2015, I am out of a job. The first time happened because my position was eliminated; the second time, because the job and I did not fit together well. As part of my severance, I have access to “outplacement services” to help me find my next position.

This outplacement process is both disruptive and intriguing, the former because it forces me to nitpick myself to find out what my core really is, the latter because it forces me to nitpick myself to find out what my core really is. For so many years I have just had jobs that I could do more or less well enough and that were done just “to pay the rent.” Real life happened outside the job domain.

But now I am engaged in a process where, for the first time in a very long time, not only do I have to dissect and assay my “skills” or “talents,” I also have to make them operate with more vigor for my success. In outplacement lingo, I am my own brand and have to take charge of my brand’s presentation and persistence.

“Brand” lingo has always peeved me because it appears to reduce human complexity to checklists and milestones, substituting spiritual/aesthetic energies with marketing strategies. But as with any language game (to use Richard Rorty’s term), I can deploy brand lingo in ways not intended by its originators to achieve my own ends. This is what I intend to do as I move toward my own version of celebrityhood.

I choose to interpret brand lingo as a modern iteration of “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Central to identifying one’s brand is putting one’s “essential nature” into words, similar to the elevator speech or the script pitch (or what my outplacement firm calls the “summary statement” on the résumé). Doing this is reductive in the way a good hypothesis is reductive: it lessens the noise created by complexity in order to home in on the signal of the self, and then test that signal’s strength, focus, and flexibility.

This testing, if done properly, is an abrasive process, both in how it punishes and scours. Regret is inevitable in this process, for things done and not done (and undone) as well as regret’s close cousin, embarrassment. (“What was I thinking?” is a recurrent refrain for me.) Pride comes in, too, both for (the few) verifiable accomplishments I can identify and the vanity that made me feel those accomplishments were more important than they were.

These regrets and this pride, however, cannot be the sole outcome of the self-exam. (Unless, of course, one wants to be the Jewish mother in the joke, “How many Jewish mothers does it take to change a lightbulb?”: “Never mind, I’ll just sit in the dark.”) I need to see them, greet them, then banish them, like a sculptor banishing unneeded stone.

What’s next? The formulation of the brand, which, for me, is an act of language. Here is my best analogy for it. I once had a chance to pitch a screenplay in Los Angeles on the third day of a three-day conference. My hotel was a mile from the convention center, and for the first two days during the fifteen minutes it took me to walk there and then back at day’s end, I practiced my pitch.

My first attempt was, as expected, terrible—overlong because over-explanatory, two pounds crammed into a one-pound bag. Even though I'd written the script, I didn't know its story. As I winnowed the chaff, I also taught myself about what I'd written—more than once I said to myself, “Oh, so that's why I put that in there.” When I did my pitch on the third day, I had the script's “brand” down pat, easily delivered, easily accepted (though not taken up by any production company).

In outplacement parlance, the brand was my summary statement. If my auditors wanted to hear more, I had more to tell them, increasing the complexity of the telling until they got what they wanted or I ran out of complexities.

So now I am crafting my Michael “brand,” and once crafted, I plan on pitching it into the world using those very platforms Tubular Labs track (or at least a subset of them—after all, there is only so much time in one's life). It is the natural second step to the first step of drafting the pitch, because if one has a great pitch but doesn't launch it, then the light really is hidden under the bushel. I have to learn how to use the storytelling tools available to me.

Resentment at having to do this? A little. It'd be nice to be “discovered,” be the overnight sensation, and have a smoother glide path into success. It'd be nice at my age not to have to exercise the kind of effort I should have exercised forty years ago (ah, that resentment creeping in—out, out, brief snarling!).

But at the same time, I feel the resentment I also feel thankful for life kicking me in the ass hard enough to keep me from being the Michael version of the Jewish mother (which I am quite capable of performing). I have no right to consider myself “above” or “better than” what this outplacement process is going to take me through—“branding” is also about my discovering a useful humility, a balance of self-deprecation and self-love.

All I know about my brand at the moment is this: I write. But this is good because it's not “I have a good suite of organizational and administrative skills (blah blah blah)” with a little whisper to the side, “And I also write.” Maybe a day late and a dollar short, but now I have no alternative but to find the brand and pitch it mightily. (By the way, if any of our dear readers is in need of a good writing advisor, please see my website, www.editorinchief.biz)

(December 2015)

It's Off To Work I Go

Last January, I wrote a piece about “branding” myself as part of a job search that I had to undertake.

Well, my job search is over—I have found a new position. I guess I’m pleased with the result. But, to be honest, only, say, a third of me is pleased, the part that will find the additional income and the security of the benefits helpful.

But I discovered a lot of useful information about myself in the branding process—more specifically, about how I have “constructed” myself professionally over the years and how much of that construction was governed by fear, failure of nerve, and a too-thin imagination. The degree to which I have not been bold, progressive, and inventive in piecing my life together is both sobering and saddening.

Of course, life is not over and, barring being knocked off my pins by the newly discovered gravitational waves, I still have time to make a decent walkabout of my life. That is another insight of my self-branding: regret has no nutritional content and should be flushed out of the system.

Looking for work has made me think, of course, about working and the nature of work itself. I have always admired John Maynard Keynes’ 1930 essay “Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren,” where he proposes the notion that work itself may be obsolete, given the incredible productivity of the capitalist system. This notion has been raised several times recently—*The Atlantic*, in July/August 2015, had “A World Without Work” by Derek Thompson, and the February issue of *PC Magazine* had a piece titled “Will Robots Make Humans Unnecessary?”, dealing, in part, with the shape of a world in which much human labor could be done by non-human labor.

At the risk of sounding thin-brained, I am all for a transformation like this, all for anything that could relieve human beings of the drudgery of work. I know, I know—but this is not about not working at all but about doing a different kind of work. Humans as a species do seem to thrive when shaping the world around them—Marx, in *Capital*, is so very good at describing these transformative energies. We need to continue to do that—we just need to do it under a whole new set of rules, expectations, vocabularies, technologies.

In other words, since all politics is local and the universe does revolve around me, the species needs to do what I did not sufficiently do in my own life: be more bold, progressive, and inventive in piecing together its living.

And the species needs to do it soon. Paul Mason's new book, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, explains why, and we owe it to those who have been sacrificed to the capitalist regime to move forward. It won't happen, but if Bernie Sanders ever solicited my opinion for his campaign, I'd urge him to go all-in/all-out on stretching his vision of democratic socialism (which right now is pretty tepid, not much more than what Harry Truman proposed) to these outer limits. Ignore Hillary, ignore the limited-vision politicking of the campaign, and instead use the megaphone he now has to ignite the revolution he says he wants.

Let's actually do this. Let's actually do this now. That's work I wouldn't mind doing.

(February 2016)

Ω

Genie Out of the Bottle

The “genie” in the phrase “you can’t put the genie back into the bottle” usually points to something we don’t want to happen but feel powerless to stop once history has freed the genie from the walls of its bottle. Loosed upon the world, the genie puts peace, sanity, and health at risk.

The genie gets rapped as bad because its coming-out usually threatens the power of the makers and keepers of the conventional wisdom to make and keep the conventional wisdom that gives them their power to make...and so on and so on. A loose genie smashes that roundelay, and while the makers/keepers don’t like that outcome, for the rest of us, this is to the good, because a genie out of the bottle is the only way we can start getting the liberation we deserve and crave.

I imagine the genie chanting Silicon Valley’s mantra of “move fast and break things” as it goes about its business. Or being “disruptive” in the way that information now melts the ligaments of the old order so that it must slink to its grave. The genie as solvent to conformist nostalgia and, at the same time, the sharp point of it, if nostalgia taken in its original meaning as the pain caused by wanting a home. Wanting a home is what the genie can cure us of, the achy-breaky hankering for a final vocabulary to tie off all our dreads, the lullaby rung on our bones by our aging, the pathetic hope that art will comfort, that ethics will light our path, that we are anything grander than the nervous, over-eating, self-inflicting animals that we are. Thanks to the genie, we can depend on nothing being dependable and that we will be one of the things broken by life moving fast.

I like this genie. I like this genie very much.

But I also think about the bottle. I think of Jimmy Tingle’s “Beer Poem” and his lush ode to alcohol. I think about the bottle and how we no longer have an untrashed language to speak about drugs and ecstasy and liberation and how the body has been turned into a bottle to bottle the imagination and how we curate this body so that we can live longer lives but in curated fashions, devaluing decadence, trading dissolution for the graded and leveled path, measured breathing the puritan split ends of the bell curve of suffocation.

No wonder the genie wants out.

We should all live as if we are genies released from bottles. We should move fast and break things, then move slow and patch things so that we can break things again. Some might argue that there is quite enough breakage, thank you very much, and that many in the world could do with some of that Jewish tikkun olam, the repairing of the world, so that they could cop a rest from the fuckery practiced against the powerless and de-voiced. Agreed—to a point.

And what if the genie is Trump? Well, so what?

Trump (not the person, because who knows that creature, but the actor playing the role) moves fast and breaks things, and it is amusing to watch the dudgeon, low and high, that people froth themselves into as he skins their sacred cows and dries them out for jerky. He is rightly deemed a maniac, but that's never disqualified anyone for success in America, so "maniac" can't be the slur that will trip him up (was that not the full intention of Hillary's "foreign policy" rantricide?) Like circular breathing, such attacks just give Trump more oxygen.

Some media machers dub him our Id so that they can look like the rational adults in the room, but they do that only to deflect attention away from their own Id, called the conventional wisdom, their sedative words steeped in a slurry of genteel violence (is that not what income inequality is?) and a brutish fear of the Other and then maquillaged with respectability and delivered on the news networks.

Sanders' genie tries to do the same thing, but Sanders has not Trump's gene for craziness. He is afflicted with earnestness, and while his breakage is the kind that calls for collective repairs after the bull has left the china shop, it won't have enough traction to put him in power. Most Americans may say they want the good Christian boy who graduates cum laude, but they really want the bad boy (and it usually is a boy).

If the genies on the loose now can crack up our American sclerosis, I am all for it. I don't want to defang them with calls for non-violence and tolerance for differing ideas and etiquette before truth. Liberation is not clean-edged, and creative destruction does not respect reason. This is the time of our shock therapy, to use Naomi Klein's phrase, that will strip away our masks and produce the fright that may (may) make it possible to see straight.

And if it doesn't? I think the grand noble experiment that is the United States is over. We will have experimented ourselves into oligarchy and

repression, warmongering and penury, into a gated community for the haves and a reservation for the never-will-haves, with a murky in-the-middle class with enough money for some consumption as they sing Jim Morrison's "Cancel my subscription to the Resurrection."

We will have what Lewis Lapham called a "participatory fascism." For the most part, a mix of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell will suffice to keep the existing order unbroken. For those that actively resist, the state will smash them, as usual, whether with the police (Occupy Wall Street) or with debt (Greece). That state will also keep all its surveillance apparatus intact (*sub rosa*, of course) and build out the public surveillance apparatus known as social media and the internet, both as a way to gather more information and to blunt resistive thinking (what is this structure but Huxley's feelies spread global?). At the lower levels, the state will allow much to happen that give people a false sense of safety and community: Little League, parades, and so on. Elections will be even more stage-managed than they are now and may even dispense with things like primaries, with the parties going back to naming the candidates themselves—cleaner, leaner, and less crazy-making for all of us.

Put the genie back into the bottle? The genie is our only way out of this coming mess.

(June 2016)

A Spiritual Discipline

A spiritual discipline begins in sadness. This thought came to me and then left, without leaving any hints, so here is my best go at it.

I had been thinking about spiritual discipline because I was feeling I needed one. Not a religio-cleansing effort but something that would enlarge the ambit of the spirit, which can get narrowed in the confines of this city. And then this thought came. I think the connection is that sadness prompts an effort to relieve life of a certain scheduledness, of being on point and on time. Also, sadness asks the body to take a breather. It asks the body to stop pommeling itself with shoulds and judgments, and rest quiet and unbruised for a while.

And because of the way our world is pitched to us these days, the sadness comes from an over-involvement in screens and the cloud and the digital rabbit-holes and chum boxes that can trap us in endless mazes but do nothing to feed any deeper longing that comes from living within the faux three-dimensionality of the two-dimensionality of pixels and code, which may appear to be magic but it lacks magic's draw of awe and delight.

Virginia Heffernan writes about this in her book *Magic and Loss*. In an interview on the podcast Track Changes, she spoke about her own five-year quest to de-link herself from her phone screen and re-link herself to the tactility of life: think about using a sextant to know your place rather than GPS and an app. She speaks about the Buddhist/Anglo term “mindfulness” as being a “memory of the present.” This present is not a present curated by Apple’s minimalist aesthetic designed to protect users from oily-skinned human beings but one concerned about undigitizable food and not losing the sense of immanent thereness that comes with great poetry.

In these states of limits and gentleness, the discipline can begin.

And what was my discipline? To reconnect with friends I had not seen in many years because I had been lazy and careless about these relationships. I had fallen into being willing to let them slide away as part of my own sliding away from my own prior lives. Doing this helped me feel wider, linked, affixed. The discipline is called a “discipline” from its root meaning of “knowledge,” which simply means paying attention to the things that deserve attention: friends, pets, justice, lovers, good food and drink.

I work in an institution, Yeshiva University, where spiritual discipline is a much more serious and on-going enterprise: one's life and the discipline are the same thing, the word made flesh. Rules hem in life. These rules are not rules of thumb but neither are they lines of "if-then" statements. They fall in-between, both loose and tight, both forgiving and demanding. One's day is given over to studying the rules, and both studying the rules and following the rules comprise the Jewish discipline.

Being an outsider, I can only see with anthropological eyes, but I sense a nostalgia at the heart of Modern Orthodoxy, constrained but fierce. The noun "Orthodoxy" reluctantly takes on the adjective "Modern" because Orthodoxers living in modern times have convinced themselves that they must live within these modern times, which require diplomatic engagements with non-Orthodox authorities: the Torah is still central, but it must also share the center if the believers are to find success within their historical moment.

No one at YU argues that the institution should abandon its alliance with the secular world and retreat to the yeshiva, at least out loud, though there are many rabbis there who would do this in a heartbeat if they could: return to a life where studying the beauty of the Torah is life itself. This ache for the shelter of the Torah comes from the nostalgia, both in the sense of wanting a past that is/was better than the present and the pain that comes from desiring a home that no longer exists.

As the anthropologist, I can understand this tension through rationality and logic, but because I have no felt experience of the believing going on within Orthodox people, the tension feels heavy and sober and unjoyful to me. It feels like a discipline more in line with our usual sense of discipline, as a means of correction and shaming. This yeshiva feeling does not attract me at all, but I can understand how the weight of its tradition might feel like an anchor and a harbor to those who believe that there can be no life worth living without a worthwhile anchor and harbor.

I live in a lighter world—no guidelines, just suggestions; no creed, just lots of MacGyvering. At times, I need the spiritual reboot, but at least I can turn on my lights on Shabbos while doing it. And the sadness? We live in a fallen world; sadness is a proper response—a feature, not a bug.

(July 2016)

Hannah and Bill

This is a sad story of a married couple laid low by disease.

Bill, a former Air Force veteran, came down with (proper term?) Parkinson's. (From what Hannah says, it took up residence 20 years ago but accelerated during the last five years.) The affliction has deleted his ability to command his body. He can walk, and Pavel, his nurse (this Russian man about whom I know very little), takes him out each day, weather permitting. But he drools (he cannot time his swallowing with his saliva build-up, something we "normal" take for-granted), is incontinent, and cannot speak at a normal conversational speed. (When he does speak, he can be vocally clear, but he can't project—I've been at the house when Hannah has had people over, and the conversation is going in multiple directions, and all he can do is try to follow along since to participate would mean for everyone to stop and wait while he forced out his words.) I don't know what has been done for him medically—there is so much research going on these days about conditions like this, I've wondered if there is some experimental protocol in which he could be involved. How could it hurt?

His condition has worn Hannah down. I can only imagine the mix of love and hate that must be in her as she is linked to this condition in her life until the day he dies. (His iteration of the disease is debilitating but apparently not deadly.) She presents a very American bourgeois persona, steeped in modesty about behavior and language, hanging out the flag on July 4, historically nostalgic (her family name is well-known), principled (from her religious faith) and believing that principles form character, capitalist champion (she always chides me about being Karl Marx). Her politics are pretty conservative vanilla, not surprisingly. She is, or wants to be, in a word, genteel.

Hannah's situation is one of those situations in life where reality will not give way to optimism or "goodness" (i.e., why do bad things happen to good people?) or magical thinking—it is a burden to be carried until Bill dies. (After he dies is another burden but easier—grieving can be done at one's own speed.) I suppose one can extract positives out of this hard case—to look on the bright side, enjoy the person to whom you pledged love for as long as you have him around, feel virtuous for continuing take the hard rather than the easier road (e.g., nursing home). But the make-believe takes its toll: I have often seen Hannah distraught and weepy, resigned, resentful, angry. She has told me that Bill has said to her

things that indicate that he knows he's a burden and that it might be better for all concerned if he weren't around. Of course, she can't accept that—but I'd be surprised if the thought hadn't crossed her mind.

And for him, what's the great prize of staying alive with no possibility of being paroled from his condition? The habit of staying alive is built strong, but it can be overcome. And, to me at least, it is a humane and compassionate thing to acknowledge that the choice to opt out is a live option. It honors his integrity and desire for dignity and should not be ruled out of bounds. (An unyielding respect for life that does not allow for humane choices to leave it is a kind of cruelty, condemning a person to live in order to make a sure a principle is not violated—as if a principle were more important and substantial than the suffering body of a human being.) Suffering is never ennobling or admirable.

What would I do if I had a similar situation with the Marvelous María Beatriz? I would do the same as Hannah—committed to her for life, I would be committed to her for her life, for whatever it would take to make her comfortable and well-served. If one were ruthless, there could be other choices (if one is ruthless, there are always other choices); but if one is “ruth” (or ruthless), then one has pity and compassion and so must make the right choice. If the situation were reversed, and I were Bill, I'd go for the assisted suicide. Life is not so precious to me that it warrants enduring such suffering and embarrassment. At that point, my body having failed me, it's time to move on to the next round, whatever it is.

I wrote a play in which a doctor helps people end their lives. His name for what he does: not “assisted suicide” but “dignicide.” The going-out from life should always be a dignicide, as graceful an exit as our frailty allows—chosen, smooth, simple, sans pain and fear. That is what I wish for Bill, and for all of us.

(October 2015)

The Grey Cashmere Dress Overcoat

The husband of our next-door neighbor died a couple of months ago—he had been plagued with Parkinson’s for a couple of decades, and the body just gave out.

The other day, my neighbor called me to ask if I would like to have her husband’s grey cashmere dress overcoat, accessorized with a snappy grey and mauve silk scarf. When I tried it on, it fit like a non-O.J. Simpson glove, as if built bespoke for my body. (Which made me remember his body, which had shrunk over time, with more stoop and slope, a fall-off from his pre-Parkinson pictures of a robust Air Force veteran.)

When I modeled the coat for the Marvelous María Beatriz, I had the same feeling as when I tried it on earlier: I didn’t so much put the coat as the coat settled itself onto my body, as if two unlinked pieces had found their match. I’ve had this feeling with other articles of clothing: the time-rumpled flannel shirt, a UniQlo-brand long-sleeved shirt of a cotton that soothes as it slides over torso and arms.

What to call this feeling, this “fitness”? Perhaps just that: fitness. Rightness. Something that pokes through the buffer layer of abstractions and metaphors that we use to veneer our lives, a layer that keeps us inside our own heads and convinces us that we *are* the center of some universe (and requires a virtual reality to remind us that there is an outside after all).

This “thingness” is not easy to define, and may not be word-amenable at all because it is not about words but tactility, nerve-messages wired in from the whole body electric, not just from the neck up and through the eyes and ears or a VR headset.

A recent review I read of several books about the bodily consequences of digital technologies—of screens and icons—touched upon how a continual online presence sequesters the body from itself, privileging the abstracted sensation over the felt experience. Yes, to be sure, something experienced online is felt, but there is a difference between brain-felt and body-including-brain-in-space-and-time-felt, and it’s the latter that digital technologies displace.

Who knows what all of this means for the evolution of a species that suffers emotionally if it does not get enough tactile stimulation, that is prone to mistake idealistic vapors for concrete realities (and then slaughter others in service

to the mistake), that imagines brave new worlds while it shits where it eats. “Thingness” keeps us anchored and vested. A grey cashmere dress coat settles onto my body like a rhyming couplet—and that feeling is just what it is, unadorned by meaning, unharassed by symbol. It feels real, and that is all I can say about it.

Michael Benedikt, in his *For an Architecture of Reality* (a constant re-read of mine), actually makes a pretty good attempt to capture how the grey coat felt. At the risk of an overlong quote, here is what he says, and at the end, just substitute “the body that wears the grey cashmere dress coat” for “architecture”:

There are valued times in almost everyone’s experience when the world is perceived afresh...At these times, our perceptions are not at all sentimental. They are, rather, matter of fact, neutral and undesiring—yet suffused with an unreasoned joy at the simple correspondence of appearance and reality, at the evident rightness of things as they are.... The world becomes singularly meaningful, yet without being “symbolical.” Objects and colors do not point to other realms, signs say what they have to and fall silent.... Precisely from such moments, I believe, we build our best and necessary sense of an independent yet meaningful reality. I should like to call them *direct esthetic experiences of the real* and suggest the following: in our media-saturated times it falls to architecture to have the direct esthetic experience of real at the center of its concerns.

Action steps for this? First, decouple from technology and the false sense it gives of always being up-to-date and on point. Second, once decoupled, apply the adjective “slow” to the acts of living, and then practice the acts: slow talk, slow tasking (otherwise known as “unitasking”), slow listening, slow thinking. As the Zen mantra goes, “When you breathe, just breathe.” We need to recover what Benedikt calls “the evident rightness of things as they are” because weathering the political times ahead will require all of us to be grounded in reality so that we are not ground down to nothing. The grey cashmere dress coat is not ideologically neutral—it reminds us that we have a center worth fighting to maintain against everything that wants to knock us off-center and feast upon our bones.

(June 2016)

Flea Markets

In a former life in a far distant galaxy, my second wife and I had a weekend table at a local flea market held in the parking lot of a local dance hall. We took turns manning the table (tedious work, standing there dumb while thoroughly indifferent people scrutinize the equivalent of your dirty linen), and on my off-hours, I wandered around the lot taking down notes about what and who I saw.

At first glance it all looks like junk. But that is deceiving, for there are subtle species here, delicate yet distinct gradations among the inhabitants, like Darwin's finches. One species is not really a flea marketer at all, if one understands by that tag a person who cleans out his basement to make a little extra money. He will offer new sets of tools, for instance, that will rival what the local hardware store has to offer in quality and price. Or stereo equipment. Or handmade furniture and gee-gaws. Or plaster statues. Or antiques. These people are out for business, to make a living off the crowds. They have the same spot week to week (usually with the choicest shade, having made a deal with the owner), they arrive at the same time, and their wares are inevitably set out in the same pattern on the tables: sockets on one end, wrenches in the middle, the leaping panther towards the back, the ancient cog-wheeled hand mixer among the flat-irons and tarnished baby spoons.

These people aren't any fun. They're no different than going to a store or a shop at the mall, and they see the activity as a business, as something which, either by itself or in tandem with something else, will support their living habits. In this sense, they violate what a true flea marketer really is. They want profit, not just a little extra money. It's that "little extra" that provides the motivation for the true flea marketer, that and a desire to carve out some more room in a crowded house or attic.

Flea marketers are not profiteers, or if they are, it is only in the merest sense of the word. They are more like rag-and-bone men who shuffle and trade amongst themselves the cast-offs of an industrial society. And in doing so they expose to the scrutiny of the world the vigorous foolishness that characterizes American manufacturing power. One can cry out in dismay at the tremendous waste on display here, the flotsam of a society that has more than it knows what to do with. Yet, if one is going to be honest, one also has to admire, while laughing at, the raw vitality laid out in gaudy array on these tables, the outward

signs of the American society's inner decision to be the biggest, best, fastest, and first when it comes to producing economic wealth.

And a gaudy array it is. Here is a partial listing: Howdy Doody rag dolls, tools (from exotic staple-pullers for fence posts to rust-pitted dredged-up-from-the-basement chisels), paperback books with the covers surgically removed, Michael Jackson pins, chains, gloves, and even a plaster bust. Dolls (babies, Barbies, frogs), muskets, lamps out of bottles and chains and plaster Virgin Marys, knives (pen, Bowie, hunting, butcher's), old *Playboys* looking virginal, R2D2 piggy bank, string sculptures of ships, salt & pepper shakers of a thousand complexions, a checkerboard hassock, cherubim bird baths, pictures of Jesus among the lambs, flowerpot spinning wheels, plastic placemats with covered bridges, old glasses with no one's prescription, enough knick-knackery to be used for fill (Granite State ashtrays, Pekingese statuettes, an ashtray with a dog pissing on a hydrant, Liberty Bell saucers, swan-necked gravy boats), stickers (Love Is..., unicorns, pigs, hearts, rainbows, zodiac signs), *National Geographics*, ancient appliances with zebra-striped electrical cords, beer signs, platitude plaques (*Today is the first day...*), figures carved from coal, elongated poodles containing liquor.

Und so weiter, as the Germans would say.

I know people who would get angry at this, seeing in it a sign of corporate frivolousness and the endemic bad taste of the American people: "Children are going hungry and the corporations are producing...." They have a point. One could wish that corporations would act with more social conscience and not produce such a tremendous sludge of useless articles. One could wish that people would "know better" and practice a little Yankee restraint and common sense.

But the risk, of course, in wishing for these things is that in one's effort to be moral and upright, one may end up simply being snobbishly undemocratic. For if a flea market is anything, it's a sign that American democracy still exists. First, these people, from different sections of the city, freely assemble on a Sunday to sell their goods (and bads). True, they must pay \$6 to the owner of the parking lot for the right to have a space, but if they were to have it in their backyards, they would've had to pay \$4 to the city for a permit anyways. There is no restraint on what they can sell (as long as it's not outright salacious, I suppose), and they can display it in any manner they choose.

Second, these people aren't out to make a profit, they're out to make a few bucks. They aren't entrepreneurs, they're ordinary people scraping together

a little extra money for a meal out here and there. Some of them engage in it more deliberately, buying up old stuff, fixing it up, and selling it again at a small profit, but even this shows an enterprising spirit that is missing from many of the stuffy bugbears of our American corporations. These are people who, for the most part, live along the margins. A small financial disaster, an illness, a car that needs fixing can often mean a severe strain. A few extra dollars rattling around in the pockets, while it doesn't provide that little boost up into security, makes life just that much easier.

And probably one of the most remarkable things is the easy camaraderie that exists between these people. Tocqueville mentioned this, and it still holds true. To be sure, the friendliness is easily won. These are people who do not spend their lives together, do not owe one another anything, who really are just glancing bits of light in one another's lives.

Yet it is a fact that after eight hours of standing next to someone else, one talks of this and that, and while the exchange is never deathless and the person is pretty easily forgotten once everything is packed up, there is a congregational ease that comes about because there are no class barriers here, no sludge of caste that clogs the arteries of conversation.

And there is even something more here, something ultimately precious to democracy, which makes democracy, American-style, what it is. As you walk around the tables, if you're open to the experience, you'll go through several phases of thought. The first one might be that dislike I mentioned above of the industrial excess, especially in light of what needs to be done to make life better in this country.

Yet, if you can put that to one side, you can also marvel at the extreme, nay, chaotic, inventiveness of capitalist industry: thousands of people and millions of dollars out there somewhere engaged in producing ice cubes with naked ladies in them and coffee mugs shaped like pregnant mothers. The marvel you may feel is not approval; it's merely a pairing with that earlier distaste you have, saving your indignation from becoming snobbish self-righteousness.

The next level is seeing, really seeing, the ordinariness of these people, and this is what is most precious. As I walked around, looking, chatting, taking notes, I began to get a queer sensation of intimacy that went beyond simply exchanging a few halloos with people, discussing the weather, remarking on the sparseness of the crowd. Excepting the people there who I would call merchants, everyone, to some degree, had their lives spread out on their tables. True, a distorted

picture, much as one might get looking through a keyhole or catching a glimpse through a window.

Yet, if you look closely enough, you begin to make up stories, make connections between that fleur-de-lis trivet and the picture of the bleeding-heart Jesus that probably hung in the kitchen. Or the straw hat nailed by a plastic strawberry and the stiff-woven reed basket that might have accompanied a young woman on a walk through a field. Lives lived through whatever conjunctions of pain and pleasure get carelessly strewn under a hot afternoon sun, sold off for a few cents. Yet to eyes that are looking just right, the lives come back and offer an unutterably precious gift of insight, of being able to go beyond the plainly visible, the parsimony of time and place.

At bottom, this love of fictive experiences is the heart of democracy. “The love of the common people” can take on many meanings, and be liable to many distortions, but in the end it has to be some Whitmanian desire to *know* the very vibrancy that runs through peoples’ lives, to incarnate into oneself all the ties that bind, all the broken and unbroken circles; in short, almost a cannibalistic desire to ingest all experience life has to offer in order to better participate in that life, (if we mean by “life” living done along the margins, without much cushion, open equally to both destruction and happiness, yet not bereft of hope or humor).

And life runs most clearly, if most painfully, through the common people. They produce the wealth in the factories, yet have to sell off bits and parts of their lives to enjoy that wealth. They spend the money that keeps the economy going, yet they are at the mercy of the whims of bankers and bureaucrats. They are the ballast that keeps the country stable (and provide the reason for keeping the country going at all), yet they are boiled down to such non-entities through polls, public opinion surveys, and advertising. To know them, then, is to know a good chunk about the life of the nation, and, more importantly, it saves them from an undeserved and dangerous reduction to pawns and masses.

Any hope for democracy’s success, that is, any hope that the people who produce the wealth, spend it, and make the society stable will have a strong and loud voice in the running of the country, begins with flea markets and a sensitive listening to what they are saying about the qualities these people bring to our common life. A “love of the common people” should not be a deification. All their common sense is balanced, and sometimes overrun by venal behavior, bigotry,

and plain stupidity. And their common sense is sometimes indistinguishable from pure stubbornness.

Yet if they are abandoned, then democracy is abandoned. Only insofar as their lives are bettered by the political policies of this country, and only insofar as they have a strong direct voice in the making of those policies, will this country have a democracy worth the name. If democracy comes to reside in the corporate boardrooms and legislative halls, then it is no longer a democracy, or it is at least a democracy that no self-respecting person would want.

Such are the lessons of flea markets.

(January 2016)

Helping Grace

Last June, MB and I had to go over to Rudy's to lend a hand—actually, four hands and a power lift to get Grace off the bathroom floor, out of her clothes, into her nightdress, and into bed.

Rudy and Grace are in their mid-80s, and a year or so before, Grace suffered a mild stroke that affected her mobility. She has gone through rehab, but over the year she has pretty much lost all muscle control and strength. She cannot stand or move around geographically on her own. She has a wheel-chair, which is how Rudy transports her around the apartment, but that also requires him to move her into and out of the chair—and let's say Rudy, at 86, is not the hale and hearty man he used to be (or likes to think that he still is, though he really knows he isn't).

Periodically Grace falls—oftentimes, she just slips out of Rudy's hands since he really can't control her dead-weight, and the EMS guys show up to pick her up and put her back. Sometimes she falls without any injury, and sometimes she injures herself, and then it's off to the hospital and the rehab center, and Rudy gets a break from having to care for her (though the anxiety doesn't really go away).

He's very brusque in his dealings with her, partly because he's just built that way, partly (probably the greater part) because he's scared: he knows he can't take care of her, not really, not if he can't pick her up or feed her properly or clean her properly. Her frailty is his own, each with separate versions but the same general condition, and that brute fact in his face makes him bluster to cover his fears. And even just as true: there's not a thing he can do by his own power to make things better. He will have to rely on friends and strangers to make these end-times as soft and pain-free as possible, and this is, at once, galling, humbling, terrifying, and absurd.

So, we walk into the apartment. Rudy had called his friend Jean, who is maybe a minute or two younger than he is, for help—and of course, between the two of them, they lack the body strength to do anything more than pick up the phone and call us for help. Grace is on the floor wedged between the toilet and the wall (the commode area is a narrow box, with just enough room for the toilet apparatus and four inches on each side), her upper back leaning against the wall. Her pants are down (Jean had cut off the diaper) and her shirt is up, naked as a jay bird, looking up with these watery blue eyes and waiting. (The stroke

has left her speech thin and whispery, so she has no “yell” in her voice, no heft, and thus no means to call out.)

MB and I consult about what to do, figuring out the game plan (at this point there is no thought about modesty on anyone’s part—we’re all crowded into this small space strategizing about this semi-nude woman on the floor, and now it’s just about a body, not a gender or a sex—body objectified, yes, but no less respected because of that—truth is, for this moment at least, that this is meat that needs to be moved).

There is only one solution. I squat down and look at Grace directly; MB is behind me and to my left, Rudy and Jean are behind me and to my right, standing in the doorway (like they were sheltering themselves during an earthquake). I tell Grace what I am going to do: I am going to embrace her, my arms under her arms and linked at her spine, and lift her bodily straight up and sit her on the toilet. I’ll have to hold her tight and lift her high enough so that her feet are off the floor and I apologize in advance for any pain this might cause.

And that’s what I do. Grace has no strength in her arms to hug me around the neck, so the best she can do is flop her arms over my shoulders to get them out of the way. I squat as low as I can go and still maintain the ability to lever myself upright, work my arms behind her, and clinch her close. Her wispy white hair tickles my face, and we are cheek-to-cheek, embraced.

As the writer, I want to place some inserts here about what passed through my mind as I held her, what might have passed through her mind as she was held by this younger man while naked, etcetera, etcetera—but they’d all be lies. All I could focus on at that moment was two things: 1) lift her high enough to get her feet off the ground without damaging her back or hips so I could land her safely on the toilet seat, and 2) not throw out my own back.

Hoist.

Land.

Back intact.

Sweat, sweat, sweat.

MB and Jean proceed to shuck off her old clothes, put on a new diaper, then a nightgown. Rudy, doing what he could do, gets the wheelchair ready, and once again, I, the “meat crane,” hug Grace one more time, elevate her, and in the same move land her without bump or ding into the wheelchair.

All during this I find myself talking to Grace, letting her know what I'm going to do before I do it and joking with her—and also just gently touching her when I'm not lugging her around—a pat on the hair, the back of my hand against her cheek, a squeeze of her hand. I'm not thinking about doing this, I am just doing this, urged by some simple sub-cognitive instruction to make sure that whatever fright she feels is countered and over-counteracted by good intention and soothing tones and pleasant distraction—anything to keep her mind off her own weakness and evaporation.

We wheel her down the short hallway to her bed. By now MB and I literally and figuratively have the hang of things: MB parks the wheelchair next to the bed, I hug Grace one more time to lift her, MB moves the chair, and I perch her on the bed. MB holds and pivots her while I lift her legs and pivot her as well, and in two shakes of a lamb's tail Grace is stretched out, pillow under her head, covered by her blanket. She smiles like weak tea, MB and I soothe her, and she rests.

Good nights all around, walk Jean to her car, and then home.

* * * * *

In January of this year [2014], Grace passed away.

Since the incident with Grace in the bathroom, many more people in my life have become more frail—my mother (who has always had one foot on a banana peel and one in the grave), my mother-in-law (with oxygen tank as companion), my brother-in-law (younger than I but afflicted with melanoma and rheumatoid arthritis in his hips). Or gone over the verge, like the beloved brother-in-law of my good colleague at work (whose sister is inconsolable at the loss of her husband).

What is one to understand from all this? What is this thing called grief that we are supposed to feel, even indulge (it does have its erotics), this mourning that is supposed to authenticate something about us as special creatures? What insights are we supposed to extract from our whole library of sentimentalized Christian scripts for comfort and explanation? Why are we so surprised and insulted when death comes when we know, from the moment we can know anything about our existences, that no one gets out alive?

I think of these things not only because they are around me but also within me (sixty-first birthday just past), so I am trying to find a different way to handle the upcoming griefs in my life. The usual available modes only make me feel powerless and inept, and I know myself well enough to know that while I would

like to be seen as a rock and a comfort to everyone (and will probably do a good facsimile of that), what's most important to me is that I gather comfort and safety for myself.

This is my beginning premise for this self-comfort: We come in to this world and then leave it is a fact of science and the grind of the material, nothing else—there is no “why.” None of what happens between birth and death means anything, intends anything, explains anything, authenticates anything. All the meaning/intending/explaining/authenticating that comes out of a life is generated by how that life is lived between its parentheses—there is no realm outside of and separate from our bodies and brains. This now is all.

This means that the first honesty one can do for oneself is to deny oneself the spiritual and its faux comforts.

But it also means embracing this nothing that is at the heart of everything—it is not a negation but an honesty and a liberation and a relief. And when it comes to grieving the inevitable losses in our lives, this is what it means: it is better to feel no emotion about anything so that what is happening can be felt clearly and sharply. This is not to say not to mourn or weep or pray for comfort, but it also means being honest with oneself about these things, that they are nothing but gesture and distraction and are never solutions because there are no solutions.

It is hard to say this without coming across as an ogre or “heartless,” but of what use is this wailing and sadness? It doesn't mean I am a good person if I let the drama of Grace's mortality wash over me—the term “good person” doesn't have any meaning to me in this situation. Nor am I “bad person” if I want to protect myself from being emotionally drained without any getting any benefit for it.

it is, in some ways, the Zen no-mind, the detachment that is, at the same time, a manner of full engagement with life, shorn, as much as possible, of emotions and ego—their static, their skews, their misdirections. The inevitability of grief requires a discipline to meet it that lessens pain, honors the grief without being captured by it, makes do, moves on.

It is only my death that ends the parentheses.

(March 2014)

Stints

I just finished a stint with the Episcopalians. It didn't work out, but for the time I was there, I had a front-pew seat on "high church" practices—the big show, as one of my colleagues called it, and indeed it was, with incense and choirs and a pile-driving organ and a veritable corps de ballet in the chancel moving this way and that according to patterns I couldn't really suss out but which got everyone where they needed to go without collision or confusion.

I know I could have gotten explanations of the movements and structures, but I'm sure they would not have given me the Episcopalian *feel*. It reminded me of when I tried to explain baseball's rules to the Marvelous María Beatriz. As I waded in deeper, and her look of confusion grew confuseder, I realized I was just spouting nonsense. To an outsider, a sport's rules, like a religion's rules, come across as both arbitrary and dreamlike, sequences that appear sensical but, when laid out end to end, turn out to be compositions of made-up stuff lumped together, more entertainment than enlightenment.

And then I hear a radio program on the subject of "quiet" (I know, ironic—but it was a Sunday morning as I sat in my kitchen drinking coffee and listening, so the time and place had a tint of quiet to it, so not completely ironic). One story featured a man who chose not to speak for 17 years. Which made me think of the liturgical choreography: what if everyone just shut up for a year and stopped trying to make the made-up stuff seem more important and more mega than it really was? How many lives might be saved, not only from violence but also from the boredom that comes from listening to it all? How many of us might become low-church Quakers speaking up only when something really needed to be said, and even then perhaps hesitating because how is one to know that the something to be said is really needed and maybe it shows a better respect to just shut up and listening to the silence of each other's presence?

The Episcopalians use so many words—readings for this and that at all the services, all gatherings started with prayers, booklets for every ceremony, institutes and "conversations" and meetings meetings meetings. After a while, it becomes a Tower of Babel made up of babble, syllables reaching skyward mortared together by the anxious hope that all this talk, driven by such good intentions, will—*must*—change the world for the better.

I made a statement at a meeting that the Episcopalians reminded me of the Unitarians, who would rather talk about heaven than actually get there. I was

assured that the Es were not at all like the UUs. Could've fooled me. They seem equally ineffectual in changing the world and proud of all their trying.

What's my point in all of this? We seem to be able to talk ourselves into rage and violence but can't talk ourselves into peace and compassion. And those games whose rules require the players to speak of peace and compassion can't seem to turn the tide. Maybe the whole species should just take a vow of silence for a year, go into hibernation, and let the world catch a rest from all our games, our rules, and our Babel-building. Who knows? Like the man who didn't talk for 17 years, maybe we'll regain our voice by being voiceless, letting the silence dissolve our insolence and leavening our blood with humility.

Except that we can't really be silent all the time—asking a human to shut up is like asking an acorn not to become an oak. So my compromise—a half-silence—has been what I call “just part of my day”—recording snippets of the human life around me as I take the subway or walk the streets or go on my daily run, small events extracted from the flow that relink me to my prime mates on this planet by delinking me from the chatter in my head, using the eyes as a way of letting silence narrate. A few of my findings:

1. A woman holding a manila folder with DIVORCE written in Sharpie across the tab.
2. A cat goes prancing by with a bird in its mouth (I assumed the bird was dead). It (she, most likely) was joined by a kitten, and the two went off to feast.
3. A young girl with this tee-shirt: “Kiss me like you miss me.”
4. Contrasting families:
5. I came across a black woman and young daughter standing at the corner of Maiden and Nassau obviously looking for directions. She was pulling a blue suitcase, small enough to fit in an overhead bin. She was dressed in wildly patterned tights and a sleeveless black sweater. She was about six months pregnant. I asked her if she needed help, and she showed me a piece of crumpled paper on which someone had printed “Coalition for the Homeless” and the address, 129 Fulton Avenue (it's actually Fulton Street). I directed her where she needed to go, and off she went.
6. When on the train going up to have lunch with the Marvelous María Beatriz, a white mother and her two children (5-year-old girl, 2-year-old boy) came on, all Teutonic in their blond hair and blue eyes. They huddled together on

the seat, she opened a bag of chips for the son, who dug in his hand while the sister rolled her eyes. Intact and on an outing for the day.

7. Sitting on the train to the right of the exit door. On the other side of the door is a mom and her child, both blond and blue-eyed. The child, a boy, is in a stroller facing his mom. Next to her, to her left, is a kindly looking old black man. The boy has a hold on the index finger of his right hand, and the two of them are smile-playing with each other. The mom seems perfectly okay with this. The sight of his small uncreased hand around the creased finger of the black man and everybody cool with this felt right.

I have more of these, but you get the point: paying attention to something other than ourselves and not doing it through the sounding brass or clanging cymbal of rules but through the half-silence of biting the tongue and sourcing ourselves in what passes right in front of us every day.

If we can't do that even once a day, well... (and here is where I let your silence complete the thought).

(November 2015)

Passing Stones, Passing Thoughts

Passing a kidney is a tale of how the small can conquer the large, the mouse frighten the lion, the David whack the Goliath (appropriately enough, with a stone).

I suffer from this malady which, despite my best efforts to flush my system and watch my diet, ambushes me regularly. For those who have never passed a stone, I can only say, as many men have said, and which has been confirmed by women who also have the affliction, that it is the closest thing to having a child that a man will ever experience. Some women with whom I've spoken have said that they would prefer the birth.

What causes the pain is a mismatch between stone and tube as the jagged-edged "calculus" of about a half-a-millimeter in size (think of a grain of pearl rice) scrapes its way down the ureter to the bladder—if one is lucky. The unlucky ones have the calculi stay in the kidney and block off its functioning, requiring either lithotripsy (breaking up the stones by ultrasound—I have had that done) or surgery (haven't had that yet).

Once the stone arrives at the bladder, it wends its way, causing sensations similar to a urinary tract infection, until one day out it pops. (Enough said.)

My recent close encounter (two in one week) played out its usual script: intense left-side pain beginning in the lower back and moving toward the spine, complete upset of the gastro-intestinal system (enough said again), water-drinking, and an hour or so of pacing back and forth trying to outlast the pain (sitting or lying down makes it worse—walking is a good distraction). Eventually, the body comes back to balance and I feel that warm relief that comes after pain has stopped as well as the grateful fatigue of having fought a fight and not lost.

Bodies—I muse upon bodies after something like this. I muse about how, despite all the brilliant abstractive capacities of the brain, the brain's prime purpose is to direct the body that houses it to find pleasure and avoid pain. I think about how all the words sprouted by the presidential wanna-bes are really about how much suffering to human bodies they either want to inflict, defer, or prevent. Every moment of our historical place and time plays itself out against human bodies—the body is the "local habitation" of every ideology, philosophy, and faith. There is not anything in human life which is not incarnate.

Yet as modernized human beings we don't base our living in our bodies. We ignore them, abuse them, overpay to repair them, virtualize them, waste them. But the body is the only thing that matters—without it, nothing else happens, and without it in good form, nothing good will happen. And the suffering of the body, the pain broadcast by the body—this is the one thing we know for sure that is shared by every person on the planet. It is the one unimpeachable basis for solidarity—all other options will melt into air.

By “body” here, I mean not just the body that stops at the skin's edge but also the whole material matrix that radiates out from the body, which to me should be arranged to reduce cruelties wherever it can be arranged to do so. We should feel the pains of others—it's the only thing that will ever keep us honest.

(March 2016)

Death of a Fish

On the one hand, he was just a betta fish – *Betta splendens*, to be exact – something that caught the eye of the Marvelous María Beatriz as she was out buying food for the cats at Petsmart. She came in with all the trappings – tank, pump, light, heater, bloodworms, and the fish (which she named Inigo Montoya) – and she set him up in the living room where he entertained us with his teal-colored flow through the water.

A few days in, he was attacked by a fungus that swaddled his body and sucked the life out of him. He lay on the bottom of the tank, the pulse of his gill flaps the only indication that he was alive. We tried various remedies, but nothing helped.

We decided to put him out of his misery – and this is where the story shifts to “on the other hand.”

The method we chose was one suggested as the most humane. We put him a container of water and placed that container in a bowl of crushed ice. His water would eventually get colder, dropping his body temperature until he passed away.

We kept vigil. It didn’t take long. As the water chilled, the undulations of his gills became slower and slower until they just stopped.

We were both a little stunned by what we had witnessed. Not to say humbled and a touch frightened. We had just watched life pass out of a living creature. Whatever “life” is, it was now gone. It had ebbed away. As it would be for us at some unknown point in the future. As it would be for everything around us, right down to the decay of quarks. This made us very quiet inside.

But because living goes on, and we had to get to bed because we had work the next day, we put Inigo’s body in a baggie and into the freezer so that we could dispose of it in a dignified way when we had time on the weekend (life gets so busy during the week!) and not just dump it into the trash. Even if it was for just a short time, we living creatures had been in commune with each other, and it feeds the health of our spirits to treat that time with respect and compassion, and pay it due homage.

The pump is still burbling. We will get a new resident – on the weekend, when there is time – and make sure that the tank is clean clean clean and the

water well-prepared and pH-balanced and a vial of anti-fungal medicine on hand just in case.

His gift to us, if it can be called that, was to get us to stop and pay attention – to him and his suffering, to the passing of time as it passes us by, to the need to stop bulling our way through life with scarcely a glance to the right or to the left. For that, he deserves a proper farewell – which we will get to just as soon as time permits. But we will get to it.

(May 2016)

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Inbox Zero

At some point in my internet travels, I came across Merlin Mann's "Inbox Zero," a protocol for keeping one's email inbox at, or close to, zero messages. I won't go through the protocol—just search for either "inbox zero" or Merlin Mann to learn it.

I have been practicing it for some time now and recommend it. Before learning about inbox zero, I would occasionally delete everything in my inbox without first going through it, figuring that if anything in the collection were super-crucial, it would surface at some point and I'd deal with it then. That rarely happened, which made me question why I had been holding onto my trove for so long and what the cost to me had been of chaperoning all that useless material.

With inbox zero, I no longer use that scorched earth approach, or at least I scorch the earth in a more systematic manner. When I tell my colleagues what I do, some are jealous that they can't (that is, won't) do it, and others become suspicious of my motives, as if not having 39,000 emails in my inbox (as my cubicle-mate does) indicates a lack of virtue and makes me an email libertine.

Of the many advantages of inbox zero, what I like most is not having the whispers of 39,000 inbox emails in the background all the time. I also appreciate that I can see my inbox more spaciouly when I know that "below the fold" at the bottom of the screen are not hanging years' worth of words and events. Mann suggests that if one must save emails, then have a single folder called "Important" and put them in there and then search through them if needed. Don't make a folder tree and parcel out emails into named depositories—it's a waste of time and effort.

What would it be like to apply inbox zero rules not just to the email inbox but the inbox of one's own memories? In the April 2016 issue of *Wired* is an article by Erica Hayasaki called *In a Perpetual Present*. She describes a condition called "severely deficient autobiographical memory." Susie McKinnon, the subject of the article, has no ability to recollect memories from her past or to anticipate anything in the future. It isn't that she's lost the memories of her experience; apparently, she never had them to begin with. For instance, in talking about a trip she and her husband took to the Cayman Islands, she imagines that it must have been hot and that she and her husband did a lot of walking. But it's a guess on her part—she has no memory of the event and can't generate any feelings about it.

She lacks the ability to create “episodic memory.” Episodic memory, as the author writes, “integrates time and sensory details in a cinematic, visceral way,” and this is what McKinnon cannot do. Yet she doesn’t feel like she’s missing out on anything, and her condition does not prevent her from living a full social life. Hayasaki concludes that “while most of us experience life as a story of gain and loss, McKinnon exists always and only in her own denouement. There is no inciting incident. No conflict. And no anxious sense of momentum toward the finale. She achieves effortlessly what some people spend years striving for: She lives entirely in the present.”

Or, another way to say it, she lives with inbox zero.

To gain a bit more room in our apartment, the Marvelous María Beatriz and I have been winnowing our belongings, another version of inbox zero. In doing so, I have come across old photos, bills, tax forms, and so on that I have to shred before I can discard. Going through these materials has brought back the episodic memories attached to them, usually accompanied by barbed feelings of regret and shame and, less often, of satisfaction and pleasure. I have to say that I don’t really like these intrusions of memory—I don’t find them comforting, and they only make me want to get through the shredding faster. How much more pleasant, at least for me, it would be to have a deficient autobiographical memory so that I could look upon this past evidence of a life as if it were something I found in a flea market about which I could be both indifferent and amused.

Inbox zero would not be a bad way to go. Obviously, Susie McKinnon has a life that she enjoys, and as one of the researchers who examined her said, “It raises fairly large questions, [one of which is] ‘What exactly does recollection do for us?’” Good question, I say. Good question.

(May 2016)

What Is It That They Think They're Rebellng Against?

I've been reading through post-election musings about why Trump voters voted for Trump (like Chris Bodenner's profile of a Trump voter in the *Atlantic*, "I Voted for the Middle Finger, for the Wrecking Ball," or "Revenge of the Forgotten Class" on *Pro Publica*), and much of it focuses on how a rank of forgotten Americans (often abbreviated as "white, male, working class") banded together to topple the Washington élites in service to a mission: bringing back an America that existed for about a decade after the end of World War II, an America that was male- and white-ascendant and industrial, dominant in the global marketplace and militarily superior – the "exceptional America" when people refer to American exceptionalism.

What I've taken away from my reading is that these "explanations," as earnest as they are, can't explain the motivations of the Trump voter because those motivations seem to be a yarn-tangle of real facts and faux facts, intestinal feelings, peeves verging into angers, confusions and misdirections, and deep visceral worries (justified or not). The writers clearly believe that if "we" (meaning those outside this cohort) can understand their aggrievements, then "we" can craft solutions for their vexations. If their vexations can be soothed, America will have taken a big step toward getting back on the right path.

But two things are clear from these analyses. First, there are no solutions to their vexations, or at least most of them. The middle-class-making industrial jobs of the 1950s are gone forever and will not be coming back. The country will not be majority white for much longer, and the United States, the nation of immigrants, will continue to be a nation of immigrants. Gender will continue becoming more fluid, abortions will still be performed, black and brown people will not stop protesting against racism, income inequality will make class mobility even more impossible than it is today, and millions of workers may simple become superfluous in the future economy.

Both political parties have no clue about how to craft a policy response to the changing world in which they find themselves. Or, to be more accurate, there are plenty of solutions on the shelf to address the tectonic shifts taking place, but neither political party's structure is designed to incorporate these ideas and champion them as policy, and neither party is prepared to lead the effort of re-designing American society to meet the historical changes it faces.

Second, Trump's rise should not have been a surprise because we've seen this story before, the "story" being the way American citizens have been bamboozled into voting against their own economic and social interests. Thomas Frank documented it well in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and *The Wrecking Crew*, but he's far from the only writer who has picked apart how the Republican Party has used culture wars, voter suppression, nostalgia, gerrymandering, and pure obstinance to maintain its power.

The conservative agenda that the Trump voters will get from Trump will not be the one for which they voted, if only because Trump can't do much of what he said he would do (deport 11 million people, build a wall for which Mexico will pay, repeal trade deals and impose tariffs, take away health insurance from millions of people) and because of the internal bickering within his own party: it is not settled as to what constitutes "genuine" conservatism, and governance will grind to a halt as the fiscal hawks, culture warriors and moderates (yes, they do exist in the party) battle this out.

But if a consolidated conservative agenda does emerge, it will not be premised on curing the ills that the Trump voters believe afflict them. It will be premised on elimination, abandonment, and punishment.

Think about what that conservative agenda will include, based on what its advocates have said:

- public assistance at all levels is swapped out for block grants and vouchers (or even just eliminated)
- public insurance (Social Security et. al.) is handed over to the tender mercies of the financial markets
- paying for health care becomes a purely personal matter (HSAs, Medicare/Medicaid privatized/voucherized or eliminated)
- military power is extended and the "war on terror" made endless
- the tax code is reduced to a flat tax
- infrastructure reform is either delayed or privatized (e.g., toll roads built by Bechtel, Chicago's 75-year lease of its parking meter revenues to Morgan Stanley)
- protective regulations are repealed (EPA, consumer protection)
- net neutrality is overturned

- Dodd-Frank is rescinded
- deportations go back up to Obama levels and higher
- the media are neutralized (libel laws, continued economic decline of the industry)
- public (or collective) space is reduced toward zero
- the courts become places where most people will not have their day (public defenders defunded, arbitration agreements imposed in contracts, and so on)
- corporations will be accorded even more people-like rights
- I'm exhausted, and there's still so much more!!

The Trump voters bought themselves a pig in a poke, just as the silent majority bought one with Nixon and the "morning in America"-hoppers bought one with Reagan and the evangelicals bought one with Bush II. They will soon find out the value of what they have purchased – the 2018 elections will tell that tale.

Enough.

I hope this breast-beating about the white working class stops soon because it is an analytical dead-end in the light of the emancipatory politics America needs.

This is the speech I wish Hillary had given after her gaffe(?) in September about Trump voters and "deplorables." What she should have said to the white working class is this:

I'm sorry I called some of you deplorables – things can get out of hand during a hard-fought election like this, and I shouldn't have said it. Here is what I should have said: It's the system that's deplorable. I'll go one step further: it's deplorable for a lot of people, not just you. It's deplorable for a lot of people who you think you don't have a connection to but you do: poor single working mothers, immigrants workers paying taxes but having to hide in the shadows, people who somehow don't fit into the definition of "normal" but who are good, decent people nonetheless. If you want to make America great, then you should link up with these people so that everyone who is getting screwed by this system can work arm-in-arm to turn the deplorable situation into a situation where ordinary people can be on the winning side.

I'm not crazy for saying this. It's part of your own history. One hundred and twenty years ago, people like you banded together to change the system. Urban workers, rural farmers, women, black people, immigrants – they formed the People's Party, also known as the Populist Party, and it shook things up. The labor movement that many Republicans so hate fought and died for things like you not having to work seven days a week and being killed on the job. The civil rights movement fought for justice, not just for black people but for poor people – and that includes you. And so much more history I could tell that would show you that when ordinary people work together and don't believe the élites scaremongering them about race and migration and religion and “the death of Western civilization,” they can accomplish great things.

And I have to be honest with you, and you know what I'm saying is true, even if you're shouting something else: we can't get the great days of post-World War II America back again. The factories aren't coming back. Coal mining isn't coming back again. Climate change is not going to stop. Black people and gay people and women are not going to give up the gains they've made, at a cost of life and limb. America is not going to be sole leader of the world again. Change is going to continue, and it's going to be strange and confusing because change is always going to be strange and confusing. We live in troubled times, but we have to be adult enough to accept that and smart enough to apply the collective intelligence we have as Americans to make sure the changes bring prosperity and safety to everyone.

I can understand your pain. But yours isn't the only pain. You want people to listen to you? You should be listened to. But you have to listen to the other people as well. It has to go both ways. Like Benjamin Franklin said when facing the might of the British empire: “We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

I prefer that we all hang together and share with each other what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

(November 2016)

Is There A Perfect Hate?

I have a 15-minute walk from my subway stop to my office. One Monday, a young man threw me this question: What is the perfect hate?

The question certainly made me stop. Stare. Hard. He didn't appear crazy: gray sweatshirt, scrubby facial hair, one of those backward-brimmed Kangol hats, smoking a cigarette. And expecting an answer. I answered: "There's no such thing."

He looked vexed by the answer, and before I could ask "why" about his asking, he crossed the street and evaporated. I made my way to work.

Of course, this question stuck with me, built as I am. We'd just been through a political exercise of people honing their serrated angers and now seem destined to suffer four years of institutionalized fury, such as cabinet secretaries pledged to wreck their agencies and an economy geared to inflict pain on everyone except its owners and non-whiteness punished by deportation and insult.

The young man's question seemed the next step, a move into metaphysics: how can all this profane anger be triple-distilled into a perfect spirit? Søren Kierkegaard may have meant his sermon, "Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing," to teach us how to will the good, but "purity" is not limited to "the good": purity is much more stretchy than that, and everything is invited to use its lexicon.

So, my answer, the proper sensitive liberal one, is wrong. His question is the prelude to a fundamentalism, and as we have seen, many humans seem to like the comforts of designed answers to our messy existence on this planet, especially if those answers can be documented by referring to a book, no matter how error-ridden or fantastical.

But let's bring this man's question down a few notches from the abstract and re-cast it by looking for an answer to "What is the perfect hate?" by looking at "Who is the perfect hater in the age of Trump?" And that would have to be, hands-down, Tomi Lahren of *The Blaze*, dubbed the "alt-right princess" by commentator Jesse Dollemore.

Watch one of her diatribes (that is, technically, what they are) in order to be schooled in the rhetoric of anger. I don't use "rhetoric" loosely, since she deploys a platoon of bad rhetorical devices against her subjects: red herring, logical fallacy, faulty cause and effect, and so on, with an occasional nod to truth and evidence to keep the flow sounding legit.

Take, for instance, her insistence during her interview with Trevor Noah on the November 30 *The Daily Show* that Black Lives Matter is the new KKK. Noah did his best to demolish the argument through rational discourse and civility, but he was doomed from the start because the game in town is not about using logic to overcome illogic but to enrage and mobilize rather than convince and persuade. As Justin Charity wrote on *The Ringer* on December 7:

[Noah has position himself as a civilized man] doing everyone, including Lahren and the people whom she disparages, a favor by hearing her out and then stumping her with a steady handful of counterarguments. But that's not how Lahren works, nor is it really how democratic politics work. Lahren doesn't persuade people. Lahren engages people. She enrages people. She mobilizes people. And, in this case, Lahren has exploited the difference between conviction—which liberal pundits fetishize—and mobilization—which conservative pundits just straight-up do—to enrich herself and amplify her nonsense at the expense of the many glorified fact-checkers who will lose ground to her in the long run....In a post-fact world, neither Sorkinese eloquence nor reflexive triangulation will save you from people like her. Like [Glenn] Beck and Rush Limbaugh before her, Tomi Lahren lies dramatically to get attention;... the liberal instinct to engage with the lies of firebrands like her will repeatedly backfire.

So, what is the perfect hate? It's not a topic or a people but a mode of presenting that hoovers up information, turns it into a slurry, hoses down the world, and demolishes any opposition by incantation, disparagement, bullshit – in fact, by anything except reason, patience and knowledge, since these were never in play to begin with.

There is no rebuttal to a Tomi Lahren because there is nothing there to rebut. Many online faulted Noah for not being Jon Stewart, whom they believe would have put Lahren in her place, but that's not true. Stewart had his bizarre friendship with Bill O'Reilly, an earlier incarnation of Lahren, and was never able to knock O'Reilly off any of O'Reilly's hobbyhorses. And, really, what "place" could Noah have put Lahren "in" (assuming he could have dodged the messy optics in this country of a black man dissing a white woman)? Being all screed and no argument makes her impregnable.

Clearly, Noah's audience (as well as the audiences of Samantha Bee and John Oliver) has some atavistic attachment to a notion of democracy where reasonable people argue reasonably about policy and tactics and the best arguments win out by virtue of their substance and "rightness."

But the framers had a reasonable fear of the democratic mob doing exactly what was done on November 8 because they knew, from their study of ancient history and law, that reason and argument have no defense against the barbarians at the gate: thus the Electoral College, thus the arterial clog called the Senate, anything to slow down the power of Lahren's voice to mobilize the angels of our worser, not our better, natures.

James Madison was especially conscious of this. He spoke out about the destructiveness of factions (what we today would call parties) and pushed for ways to buffer the workings of the government and its governors from them. But he also knew that he was building a weak dam against a rising tide, and even in his lifetime he saw the coarsening effect of faction in action.

Faction and divisiveness have always been the congenital weakness of American democracy, so the rise of Trump and Lahren signals, to me, the exhaustion of this phase of the national experiment. Just as capitalism seems to be struggling against its own exhaustion (see recent work by Paul Mason and Wolfgang Streeck), this current iteration of democracy (including all forms where it is practiced) seems to have run out of ideas about how to make the world over in its image. (Interestingly, both systems have had concurrent lifespans of about two-and-a-half centuries.)

There are, of course, antidotes to the exhaustion in this country, many experiments going on with cooperatives, local currencies, sustainable energy, and so on. Currently, there are no resources and institutions to aggregate them and scale them up, but they are there despite our national slow-motion train wreck.

This is where our energies should go.

Let's simply stipulate that Trump's reign signals the end of the first phase of the American experiment. While we need to continue resisting all of Trump's incursions in order to keep people as safe and secure as they can be in these retrograde times, let's also see what we can do to design the next phase of the experiment. Let's just assume that Trump and Lahren and their ilk are already in the dustbin of history and not waste energy on them. Let's evolve a replacement that can sweep away the barbarians after they've been consumed by their own decadence and dissolve into dust.

(December 2016)

Trump-proofing America

The Cooper Hewitt/Smithsonian Design Museum is running an exhibit until February called “By The People: Designing a Better America.” It’s the third in a series of using the re-design of the built environment to make lives better, and this one focuses on poverty in the United States.

These initiatives are local/regional in scope and involve face-to-face engagements, one brick, one story, one narrative thread at a time. These projects not only design places, the process of designing the places also designs the people, establishing the values of coöperation and closeness that many Americans say they cherish and miss the presence of but which they somehow lost hold of in the spasm of the last election.

Linked but not hierarchical, open source rather than copyrighted, anchored in the local rather than atomized in the national, these projects are the antidote to Trumpism’s meanness, barbarian élitism and roughshod irrationality. Not that the people heading these projects can totally dismiss the regime, and not that the execution of the projects preëmpts building a nation-wide resistance movement, but they are the way forward past the exhaustion of national politics, which has clearly run out of ideals, verve, sanity and safety.

Focusing on this kind of lower-level nation-building, based in local needs and employing local brilliance, is the antidote to the whingeing and hand-wringing going on right now among what passes for a “left” in America about what to do about Trump and Trumpism. Projects like the ones on exhibit at Cooper Hewitt don’t so much “solve” racism or class war or xenophobia as out-flank them by reënergizing the concepts of a “commonwealth” and the public sphere and enlarging the circle of who gets to be considered a neighbor and thus worthy of protection.

The modernist impulse has always been to value universal ideals above local allegiances because clannish loyalties have often fueled great carnage and misery. But the truth is that the universal ideals only became manifest in local lives making local improvements to local habitations, where sweat is shared not with abstract “human beings” but with bodies bearing names and suffering frailties. Only by building these local densities can we build the constituency that will resist American Trumpist inclinations in a way that is shared, open source, dynamic and assured.

This approach fits an age where the last great social movement, labor, has been destroyed and where we live in a world fragmented by neoliberalism and information fortresses (e.g., Apple, Facebook, et al) and have had our inner selves “apped” in order to promote profit through market segmentation. Information is as abundant as is the means for sharing it, and only through horizontal networks that use data to uncover connections and patterns can we regain agency over our lives and dissolve the legacy structures that bind us to a decaying economic system and its useless disciplines and punishments.

Dispersed yet united, local yet nationwide, resistant yet accommodating – this is clearly the road the nation needs to follow because the election of Trump has shown us that our national narrative no longer can provide a useful guide for future action. Just listen to Obama’s farewell speech in which he trumpets an outdated vision of American exceptionalism – his way is no longer the way forward, if it ever was.

The blessing of Trump is that he now provides us a great excuse to extinguish so many harmful mythologies about ourselves and design new spaces for an uncertain future. Projects like the ones on display at Cooper Hewitt are the first pages in our new instruction manual.

(January 2017)

On Sadness and Politics

My recent reading has been more re-reading, going back to (for me) foundational texts that have had a hand in sculpting my understanding of the world.

Richard Rorty's *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* is one of those. The reason for going back to it has to do with our current political situation. I wanted to reexamine his argument, in the latter part of the book, about the divide between public and private lives and the place of politics in each. Rorty knows that the border between the two is porous, but he wants to reserve a "privateness" to the private parts of one's life, which he describes as "ironist," so that the liberal humanist project of solidarity does not bog down in a reliance on unreliable universalist truths about human nature but instead has an anchor in the contingent suffering each person suffers from day to day.

Using Rorty's own insistence that language and its meanings are never finished and always morphable, I feel these days that the topographic divide that Rorty gives to life – private here, public there – has dissolved under the solvent of our current American politics, where tweets act as policy statements, personal presidential gain is the dominant democratic project and we are all forced to take a stand on our common slippery slope, like it or not.

We now breathe the air of a smoldering landscape of anger, intolerance, and triumphalism. However, these fires are not new fires. They have always kept American history on a low boil, flaring up at times in civil wars and genocides, and then falling back, never extinguished.

The heat and pollution of the American burn is what gives Raoul Peck's documentary about James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*, such a searing effect, at least to me (I've seen it twice). The heavy sadness laced throughout Baldwin's version of the history of black people in white America easily maps onto our republic, in the throes of its latest fever-dream, where many gleefully demonize others and inflict cruelties upon them while using linguistic dodges – national security, the safety of the homeland – to excuse their barbarism.

Not without resistance, though, which is good to see, millions committed to finding ways to stabilize the slippery slope and make the ground more supportive, just as in Baldwin's time the civil rights movement bloodied its way towards something like a victory.

But as important as this resistance is, both in its short-term marching and longer-term institution-building, it will be not sufficient to put out those coal-seam fires burrowing through the American historical record. The fires exist, as Baldwin points out, because the dominant white culture has not faced, and thus has not answered, this question: What is it in you that needs to create the nigger (the “nigger” here not just black people but any people deemed the “other,” whether that be Native Americans or Muslims, and, as the “other,” not even really considered fully human)?

Baldwin’s sadness is also our sadness, his unanswered question the toxin that poisons all efforts at solidarity and forms the basis of a society that seems unable to feel satisfied and purposeful domestically and stands discredited internationally.

However, when Baldwin is asked if he is an optimist, he answers that he is forced to be an optimist because he is alive, and his answer stands for us as well. But because his optimism is not cheerful, we may ask how useful can it be. My answer would be that any chance of putting out those subterranean fires begins by disassembling our ill-structured private American selves, the part of human life that Rorty privileges.

We need to stop believing in principles, like American exceptionalism and white supremacy, that harden our hearts and block our ears.

We need to chuck out most of Christian theology and keep the few tenets concerning charity and resistance mouthed by Jesus, the way Jefferson amended the New Testament to get rid of the miracles and keep the moral teachings.

We need to ’fess up to the truth of how American prosperity required, and still requires, immense blood sacrifices of the powerless and the foreign.

We need to retire the myths of rugged individualism and bootstrapping self-helpery in order to make room for “the more perfect union” we promised ourselves two-and-a-half centuries ago.

We need to become real adults so that we can acquire a deeper acceptance of how our limitations and frailties as meat creatures can, and should, take the piss out of any abstract idealism or righteous crusading and instead bind us in a solidarity of shared bodies and pain.

If, in this country, the people are truly to be the governors, then we, as those “people,” need to become people worthy of governing ourselves. This requires discipline – the species’ simultaneous strength and weakness is that humans

are born in a malleable state and do not, from the womb, come equipped with love, humility, patience, self-deprecation, and humor.

The antidote to Trumpism begins in disciplining our private lives to be a people worthy of exercising power and discretion. The angels of a better nature are built, not summoned; if we do not build them, they will not come. What will take their place will be the demons of our human nature, the ego, appetite, and selfishness embedded in our DNA that may enable the creature to survive a hostile world but ensures that the creature will not become a humane human being.

This is, I think, what Baldwin means by linking optimism to being alive: we may not have done it right, but that doesn't mean we can't do it right: the possibility is never foreclosed as long as people are breathing and feel pain in their bodies.

The great gift of Trumpism, if such a phrase can be used, is that it is spurring us (at least some of us) to get it right this time. The fight is public and private, against the external powers and against our own sloth, for a commonwealth peopled by governors schooled for the task. It is not enough to rail against the barbarians and hope they don't invade your home. Better to assume that they will act as barbarians usually do and take it upon yourself to be the best example of the civilization you want to protect, which will also be the best defense against the siege of this wrecking crew.

(February 2017)

On Exact Language

The current American political situation is now in full deconstructionist mode. Our power-mongers, as all power-mongers do, have bled the truth value out of language. With that accomplished, they can now bully the body politic as they please.

Orwell once said that in times like this, “the restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men,” and the “re” in “restatement” means that it must be done again and again, like water against rock. Note that he does not say that the duty is to convince anyone of the obvious: people holding on to their savage idealisms will not be convinced to let them go. The only duty is to keep the obvious obvious, in play and a live option (to use William James’ notion in *The Will to Believe*).

This duty requires language that is Adamic, in that it names the thing or the action, the noun or the verb, as exactly as possible and as if it were being named for the first time. Lately I’ve been searching for English nouns and verbs that do just that, less to box them up as a lexicon than to remind myself just how powerful a toolbox the English language can be.

Just a few obvious ones:

- *Philtrum* – the groove between your nose and upper lip
- *Aglet* – the hard tip on a shoelace
- *Punt* – the indentation on the bottom of a wine bottle
- *Lunule* – the whitish crescent at the base of a fingernail
- *Tittle* – the dot over an “i” or “j”.
- *Glabella* – the smooth space between the eyebrows
- *Muntin* – a strip separating panes of glass in a window sash
- *Lemniscate* – the infinity symbol
- *Fourchette* – the strip or shaped piece used for the sides of the fingers of a glove

I am sure Scene4 readers can come up with more examples of the exact names for the things in our lives, but the point of the exercise (beyond just the delight of discovering the terms) is to remind ourselves that when we restate the obvious, we can do so with precision.

In the 1980s HBO comedy show *Not Necessarily the News*, Rich Hall would have a segment on “sniglets,” which he defined as “any word that doesn’t appear in the dictionary, but should,” things like downpause (for when a car drives under a bridge during a rainstorm) and expresshole (for a person with more than 10 items in the express check-out lane).

What I always liked about sniglets was not just the inventiveness but also how the coinages refreshed our language, extending Adam’s impulse to invent new ways of thinking by creating new language to prompt that thinking.

Since our overlords have fogged up “the obvious” with charges of “fake news” and “alternative facts,” we need a new approach to doing Orwell’s duty that means digging deeper in our word hoard and inventing what we need that we don’t find there. Even before 45 took office, our political vocabularies no longer mapped themselves onto the realities of most citizen’s lives; these days, they map onto nothing but tweet-whims and Bannon’s appetites. Let the “extreme vetting” of our language begin so that we can do our duty of resistance and bring down the current regime.

(March 2017)

Escalations

In New York, an unwritten code states that standers on an escalator stand to the right while walkers walk on the left. A *New York Times* article this April presented evidence that if everyone stood together and no one walked, the beneficiaries would not be the walkers (they would have time added to their journey) but the people waiting to get on the escalator. Congestion would be reduced because walkers take up more space than standers.

What's the chance that data and evidence will overcome individual urgency? Not likely. Sam Schwartz, New York City's former traffic commissioner, said people's competitive nature tends to trump logic and science whenever they are confronted with a capacity problem. "I don't believe Americans, any longer (if they ever did), have a rational button."

Given the current state of our state, it would be easy to jump on his last statement, but that's not where I want to go. I'm interested in the unwritten code on the escalator because it's part of a network of etiquettes that nudge people along their daily paths. Many things comprise these protocols, most of which we aren't aware of until something comes along to bring them up to the light.

Take, for instance, the recent failure of the Republicans' health care effort. Once people had the chance to see the overt and hidden benefits of the system, they decided that, even if not perfect, they liked what they had and didn't want it taken away.

Another instance is the "skinny budget" presented by President 45 in March, which unmasked the multiple ways the government is threaded through our lives. It is one thing to wield an ideological cleaver and another to see that what is cleaved affect things like meals to seniors, clean air and water, maintenance of the GPS satellites, and basic and advanced medical research – stuff that keeps people alive and social institutions solid.

Back in 2014, the BBC had an article about mycelia, the fungal network that links plants in an underground system by which they can share nutrients and information, what one researcher called the "wood wide web."

We humans have our mycelia as well, like escalator codes and the "intrusions" of "gummint," and while it may give ideological pleasure to rip out the web and leave everything to the tender mercies of the marketplace, it would be so much better for everyone if we could push the "rational button" and get a

“fat budget” that would make sure that everyone on the escalator is safe on their journey even if that means the walkers don’t get what they think they deserve.

(April 2017)

Ω

Keurig Thinking

The other day I came up with what I thought was a clever term: Keurigization. Seems I was late to the game.

There's a great discussion of the term on MetaFilter called "Measuring Out My Life in K-Cups" (a nod to "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons") and a site dedicated to the death of the K-Cup (www.killthekcup.org), where they have a killer video – literally – where the 9 billion K-Cups thrown into landfills come back for vengeance.

John Sylvan, the inventor of the Keurig coffee machine (the name comes from the Dutch for "excellence"), does not use the machine and has been quoted as saying, "They're kind of expensive to use – plus, it's not like drip coffee is tough to make."

There's a good online 2015 article in *The Atlantic* that takes apart some of the high dudgeon over the device, noting that the Keurig does solve breakroom conflicts about clean-up and coffee-making responsibilities and, from some angles, is a more efficient coffee delivery system (i.e., has a smaller environmental footprint) than Bunn coffee makers or the French press.

Of course, this being the United States under its 21st-century capitalist overlords, Keurigization has leaked into other product lines, such as oatmeal (Nature Valley Bistro cups), wine (Kuvée), tortillas (Flatev), cookies (Chip Smart Cookie Oven), and beer (Pico Home Brew Beer), all of which use the pod technology and are based on the notion that our lives are too [fill in the adjective] to do such simple things as boil water to pour over instant oatmeal or roll out and bake your own damn tortillas.

While arguments about convenience and carbon footprints are interesting, to me they miss this last point about the workings of capitalism, a system which slices reality into finer and finer segments to make products for those segments and extract the profits that come from that segmentation. This is how capitalism works best: divide us, conquer us, laugh all the way to bank, repeat.

What a dull and graceless answer to the catechistic question of "What is the chief end of man?" (The catechism doesn't offer much of an answer either – "to glorify God" – itself a dull and graceless answer to the suffering and anxiety of human life.)

On the other hand, perhaps it will be in the arguments over how best to brew a heady caffeine concoction that we can find reintegration as a community and a re-loving of the senses, where we can un-Keurig ourselves from the K-Cups of our political principles and moral beliefs and brew something human, affectionate and bracing that above all its other merits can be shared, savored, banked in the commons, repeated without end.

(June 2017)

Ω

Neil Postman

For a long time I have wanted to write a reprise of Neil Postman's 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. In my effort as I get older to turn good intentions into good actions to ward off regret, I have made an appointment with myself during each lunch hour to read through his works and take the notes that will become the book.

Each afternoon (well, most afternoons, depending on the flow and ebb of the office) I go to a public indoor plaza hosted by Deutsche Bank and sit among the lunchers and speed chess players and focused backgammonists and walking tours using the bathrooms and the street people dancing their invisibility shuffle to read Mr. Postman and muse upon our digital age.

I have only just started this investigation, but here is a preliminary report on the conversation Mr. Postman and I have been having.

I have always liked the title of his book because for me it described the end-goal of American culture since we acquired the ability to digitize everything: not deeds of great renown that bring honor upon the leaders and the citizens but the constant birthing of "content" to entertain the world. Postman used the title because he felt that American culture had misled itself about how thought and action could be oppressed. It had focused on George Orwell and the "boot in the face" when in reality, it was the "feelies" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* that posed the greater threat.

The "feelies" control people by getting people to control themselves. The feelies help them internalize controls on their behavior so that the state doesn't have to impose them externally. Much more economic that way.

The feelies roughly correspond to pretty much everything sluicing daily through the smartphones, tablets, laptops, watches and other soon-to-be wearables that adorn our hybrid (if not quite cyborg) selves. This flood comes from multiple directions and is invited rather than feared: people spend a lot of money to be wired-in and delivered-to, and companies constantly vie to lay down new piping into people's eyes, ears, and wallets.

This multiple-screen assault didn't exist in Postman's 1985, believe it or not. His bugbear was television and how its ahistorical, discontinuous, context-free approach to information had infiltrated everything until the Typographic Mind (his phrase for print-based cogitation, with its emphasis on argument,

sequence, and logic) had been boiled down into the Show Business Mind (open for spectacle, impatient, passive).

In the world he creates in his book, this change, beginning in the 19th century with telegraphy and photography, has shifted people politically from considered judgments about the issues of the day (he cites the Lincoln/Douglas debates as exemplary of how seriously the yeomanry took their politics) to imbibers of pap with curtailed attention spans (making them easily manipulated and distractable).

This change has its moral implications for him as well. There is a strain of finger-wagging both in this book and the next one of his I'm reading, *Technopoly*, where he indicts not only the economic forces behind this change but also the people for not fighting back and for letting their moral selves go slack. Though I understand his intention, this moralizing tone annoys me. (I, too, have had this same censorious feeling about people, but when I heard this echoed back to me, I realized how annoying it must be to others to hear it come out of my mouth. Good lesson learned.)

It's not that he's advocating quill pens and parchment over computers (though I suspect he would not find that altogether a bad trade-off) and he does recognize that our technologies can be friends with benefits—his utopian strain is restrained.

But his primary concern, as it usually is with prophets, is the state of our souls. He cites Thoreau often because, like Thoreau, he is worried that our possessions (in this case, our technologies) will possess us. A primary theme in *Technopoly* is the ideology of a technology, sometimes visible but most times not. What he means by this phrase is the hidden way technologies structure our existence: what perceptions and possibilities they permit and don't permit and how they get us to accept states of being as "normal" that are, in reality, highly regimented and geared to serving specialized interests. (Because he's a professor, he uses as an example the ideology of a "course," which he considers a technology: how we accept that they exist in a catalogue and meet at certain times for a length of time and so on and thus we assume that "courses" are the best way to structure knowledge and study it when they really exist for administrative convenience and control.)

At a lower level he has no argument with the machinery of an ideology—humans must make discriminations about the reality around them in order to survive that reality: not all facts are equally relevant. What he takes issue with

is when this unavoidable need to make decisions about which parts of reality to pay attention to is choreographed by our technologies and the people who make and promote them in order to discipline people into behaving a certain way that is then pitched as necessary and natural, just the way things are and good for them.

This Thoreauvian concern for salvation of our beings seems, as far as I've read him, the philosophical engine that drives his analysis. At times he overstates things in order to make his point, especially in the way he uses capital-T Technology as if it were an actual protagonist in this morality play: making decisions, deploying troops, and so on. And he sometimes overleaps himself. For example, in his history of the stethoscope, he goes from the introduction of the technology to a full-blown indictment of medicine for impersonal treatment of patients' bodies (rather than of patients as people). He chooses to skip over intermediate steps because they slow down his indictments.

The stethoscope corrected a flaw in the treatment of a patient because social convention did not allow the inventor to put his ear to a woman's bosom to hear her breathing. Yes, he was attentive to the person and wanted to relieve her suffering, but the technology allowed him to be more attentive, not less. In his terms, the stethoscope became a tool in the tool-making world of medicine, aiding but not supplanting the practice. But it then becomes a technology as Technopolist attitudes take over the profession, moving it towards efficiency and industrializing its practices.

But while there are nits to pick in his approach, his core concern has weight: the technology of digitizing has re-ground the lenses through which we see the world and re-choreographed how we act upon it and it acts upon us, and this re-jiggering has moral effects.

But even as I write this, something feels, I don't know, squishy about it. Because it is one thing to state that people no longer have typographic habits of mind because multiple screens have completely overwhelmed the single screen of the analog page—this is not hard to verify. But it is another thing to say that you can cite with certainty the social, political, and moral shifts that this creates and form the guides that will get us back to some restore point.

First, while we live in the present, the present is always overlapped by other time frames. Protests in Ferguson and Baltimore have as much to do with the unresolved issues stemming from slavery as they do about current police practices. The wars in what we call the Middle East oscillate between medieval

ideas of governance and forward-learning social media technologies. The point is, the present is a time stew always at a high simmer if not a boil, and any conclusions made about what something “is” or “will be” will be rolled over and flowed to the bottom as something else ascends to awareness.

Second, though, what rises in this stew is not completely by chance. Who tends the fire, the composition of the pot, who gets to throw in what, and so on (okay, so the metaphor is breaking down) means some things will come up and some things will not, or only come up in certain ways and not in others. And while the inputs may be managed, as with a recipe, nothing is guaranteed to come out as predicted once the mix begins: too many variables to control for.

Which is to say that while what Postman says about the deletional effects of Technopoly on the minds and souls living within the polis *seems* right and reasonable, they are, in the end, only observations, not facts. But he is right in that *something* has changed—we are not even the people we were in the 1990s and early aughts, much less a century and a half ago at the start of the Industrial Revolution—it’s just not clear what that *something* is (most likely it’s a multiple *something* rather than a unitary something).

We are still debating about and feeling the effects of the first Industrial Revolution in addition to all the other “revolutions” that took place in-between—very little about these effects has become settled historical doctrine, bedrock fact. (In fact, we’re still debating about the agricultural revolution of 10,000 years ago—it’s not settled if it was a boon or not for the human species.)

Even more so with the “digital” revolution—we have no way of knowing how to know how these things will play out in the minds and bodies of human beings and the social structures in which they live. Perhaps we are, as Postman says, amusing ourselves to death, “death” not being demise so much as capture within a curated capitalist enterprise with narrow and divisive interests. (And perhaps not all that much “amusing”—I mean, is Candy Crush amusing? Though I get what he’s getting at—it’s the Puritan sense of “amusing,” as meaning frivolous and lightweight.)

I think what’s important about what he wrote is not if he’s right (no way to prove that) but how it mixes with all of the other provisional thinking people are doing about the Technopoly in which we live (to use Postman’s word). I think that’s the best we can do at the moment. To do otherwise is to give into the temptation to pass judgments rather than make annotations. To paraphrase Hillel: the principle is that things are changing. All else is commentary.

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I want to ground things here, though—there are material interests involved here, things with weight. This “revolution” didn’t just happen—it has been aided and abetted by policies and politics, actual human players making actual human choices. But how to examine this, how to go beyond “cultural critique” and all the vapor inside such an approach?

I read an article recently about “virtuality” from a Marxist analyst, and it shifts the discussion. Virtuality, or the virtual, was something that Marx examined in his analysis of the commodity as well as in his analysis of ideology.

The notion of virtual he would have been familiar with would have come from optics (about a reversed image from a camera obscura which, miraculously, appears right-side up—that is, an image that is not the full truth) and math (a virtual point being one that does not exist in space but describes a space in which it could exist).

In his notion of the commodity, Marx talked about the material thing and then the “ghostly” things inside the commodity that are about the social relations that produced it. These ghosts are there in some real sense and they have effects in the real world. (This is not a hard thing to understand—just think about how brands try to build in this ghostliness and make the product they sell all about this ghostly quality, not the product.)

This virtuality would have existed in everything Postman feels is important. For instance, the book—it has an aura of the sacred and the exceptional. This is the virtual book inside the actual book—the “spirit” that people read into it because they are reading their own sense of self into it as well.

(What is human communication but all of this transfer of ghostly qualities, this subtext that is also top-text?)

What couldn’t happen is to have this virtuality externalized because the technology didn’t exist to do that as well as the language to accompany the technology to explain it. These days the focus is on the “virtual” aspects of things, which usually translates into “information”—things are their information. It’s almost as if it’s been reversed: the thing has become the ghost, and the ghost has become the thing that is traded around.

This has led to a vision of the virtual as “clean,” that is, free of the grubby realities of politics and people and conflict. This is, of course, nonsense, but it is a powerful language for those in power to use because it helps them hide the

exploitative nature of what they're doing. The pursuit of profit always requires an exploitation, and this seems to inspire an opposite force of explaining that it isn't really exploitation at all but freedom or inspiration or some other nonsense (like the canard that the Internet will usher in a new era of democratic collaboration.)

But the virtual is not clean at all. This information needs to be created somewhere, by someone, bossed over by someone else. The cloud is not a cloud at all but hard-core server farms guzzling electricity. Content is squeezed out of people (think of the bloggers for Huff Post who didn't get paid when it got bought for \$35 million—Ariana got her cut, though). iPhones are made in a toxic environment that drives some to suicide. Rare metals are dug out of the earth by slaves.

As the authors of the article I read put it, using “virtual” makes certain things invisible, especially when it comes to labor and politics. That's because part of its lingo is about how we can detach ourselves from the limits of thing-reality—a kind of utopian dream of being unfettered by the body's limits. Of course, this only works for a certain stratum of people who have an invisibilized army making sure that those pesky thing-realities like food and sewage get taken care of. (I've often had to laugh at the Galt syndrome from Rand that assumes all of the masters of the universe will somehow be freed of the mundane tasks of food making and house cleaning.)

Certain aspects of the virtual have been helpful—real-time collaboration is easier with the new technologies, and communications with the far-off and the lost-in-the-past are more possible because of Facebook and other services. And there are others if I thought about it. (And these are not entirely clean either, since they are mediated by corporations that will exploit its users for ad revenue and deep data for other marketing or selling purposes.)

But it's not like these things didn't happen before digitization. They were harder to do and required more energy input (think of all the index cards for the Oxford English dictionary and the brain power to keep them in order and the inventiveness of the indexing), but they existed. Think of the whole British empire run without computers, on analog systems.

But we can't let the ease provided by these technologies obscure the fact that the seething politics underneath, the labor resistance to capital, the uncertainty capital feels because human labor cannot be completely eliminated, has not gone away. It's just shifted onto another playing field. This is something Marx would have understood completely: the digital revolution is only a

revolution to those who want to control the inputs and outputs in a very old game of profiteering, a new tool to use to play an old game.

And while Postman is right that this “revolution” (or whatever we want to call it) has shifted how people are aware of the world around them and how they fit into that world, this doesn’t mean that it has shifted their consciousness in the way Marx spoke about it so that they can see more clearly their exploitation. It is a false consciousness—Postman and Marx would agree. But its falsity lies less in a lost world than in the way it has been fashioned to keep people distracted—in a sense, “amused,” though there are some pretty dire consequences to all of this: just ask all of the people who have been made superfluous by our economic system.

The trick here is to see if there is a language that can be crafted that blends the moral dismay of Postman and the focus on labor and capital that forever drives our material conditions, and thus our material selves.

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A gloss on the “cleanliness” of the virtual can be read in an excerpt included in the Harper’s “Readings” section for June 2015 from *Unmanned: Drones, Data, and the Illusion of Perfect Warfare* by William Arkin. In short, the military effort to reduce casualties and cost has made it rely on technology in a way that ends up substituting human judgment and sacrifice for an ersatz certainty, “ersatz” because it is not tied to any strategy but only in service to a vague political imperative about fighting terrorism (or, more accurately, in service to the theatre that mimes the political imperative for people who don’t believe in it at all). He calls it a “phantasmagorical” effort, which is a good way to look at it: so much effort is made to gather data and sift it and act upon it that billions of dollars and hours get spent on trying to track and eliminate a few thousand people. The effort is “precise,” but it has no vitality: as he says, it almost becomes a situation “in which everyone on the battlefield is there only to justify being on the battlefield.”

His ending words are good: drones signify “our deluded pursuit of perfect war, which is produced by our hubristic endeavor to root out evil everywhere and our increased unwillingness to suffer human sacrifice in the course of making war.”

This is an important point when thinking about the “virtual” and “virtuality”: what does the word hide or refuse access to? What density of life is lost when there is an emphasis on “clean”? What moral density as well?

(March 2015)

Ω

The Spiritual

In music, the “spiritual” sings out about ultimates: grace, haven, grounds of being, doubt, pleading, rescue. It voices comfort and complaint, reaffirmation and reprimand. Under it all, though, is the assumption—no, the certainty—that a listener listens on the other end, that a Promiser offers the Promised Land.

But what does spiritual mean if one cannot believe that a listener waits at the other end of a prayer? Cannot believe that underneath the grave contusions of life an order and meaning, while difficult and sometimes opaque, nevertheless reigns?

“Spiritual” need not disappear just because no one may reside in the Celestial Home. To me, “spiritual” is a vocabulary we can use to talk about the challenges in life that other vocabularies can’t adequately parse: instrumental, political, artistic, economic, and so on (though each of these, and others, has something to say about the spiritual—like food on a plate, all vocabularies eventually get mushed together).

To talk about the state of one’s “soul”; to focus on ultimate meanings; to lift the body and its mind beyond the immediate and guard them against abrasion and evaporation; to seek out principles for conduct that have more tenacious roots than the instrumental and utilitarian; to craft a “long view” that also doesn’t scant the vibrancy (if narrowness) of the short view; to exercise a short view of things infused with the long view; to act with purpose even when no overarching purpose is clear; to have a bias for courtesy in human dealings (oh so hard in New York City—a true Christian challenge is this city!)—these are spiritual self-dealings unencumbered by a Divinity, a pagan-like approach to life that searches for rationalizations to do well rather than ill, good rather than evil, against a backdrop of a cosmic void, crimped understandings, and the ever-present danger of bad wine.

I would, hoary atheist that I am, go so far as to include strictly religious vocabularies as well in this spiritualizing, specifically the Bible’s words, not because the Bible has any authority to it (it can’t be the Word or words of God if I believe there is no God to word it) but because it offers templates with which to think about the purpose and direction of life. The Fall, from a state of ignorance/innocence into the dirt of self-consciousness: is this not our animal births? Cain and Abel: not only the conflict among blood brothers but also our seeming destiny as humans to harm those whom we say we love. Jesus Christ: the ache

for redemption, for a new beginning shorn of past sins—is this not the American ache for reinvention and moral avoidance? Jesus Christ again: the historical example of how a blood sacrifice is required for even the smallest advance in human dignity and freedom.

These templates, these ready-mades, like all templates, help give a narrative shape to the babble—they are a good way for us to listen to ourselves talking about ourselves (which is the only reason to have and to do art).

For instance, in John Gardner's novel *October Light*, the elderly dairy farmer James believes that life gravity governs our moral lives—more specifically, since gravity is always actively pulling humans toward the center of the earth, humans must exert an opposite push to rise against gravity's clutches to keep from being decomposed into brute compost, that is, to be driven by their animal natures. This active struggle to delay the inevitable dissolve gives meaning to James' life—and it's not a bad program to follow for one's life in a debauched America where most everything is for sale (and has been sold) and the notion that anyone should sacrifice anything for a greater good is smeared and defamed.

In other words, James' life has a spiritual dimension even though he is not too sure that there is any grand lighthouse keeper showing the way for the wandering ships upon the sea. This vocabulary, this way of telling his life-story to himself, gives shape to the shifting (and shiftless) and populates the void with meaning.

Of course, using, say, the vocabulary of the Resurrection is not the same as believing that the Resurrection happened; it's only about using a palette to paint something, not an affirmation of faith in the supernatural of the palette. Because I have no faith in the faith that declares a Divinity and thus a teleological purpose in life, all this talk about vocabularies is also talk about jury-rigging our way through our days, doing the best we can with limited information and resources in a world/universe indifferent to our fates.

This can be—is—a tiring struggle since it only ends in death and all successes are contingent and transitory (and except for a few, completely forgotten by everybody). In fact, I think those who choose to find a home in religious faith choose to avoid this struggle—I can't blame them, for whom would fardels bear, but I can't agree with them either—for me, without the thorniness of the path and the sadness of the inevitable defeat, there is no possibility for robust joy and satisfying arrival. Or, in James' words, without the upward stretch against a ravenous gravity, there is no chance to absorb the sun and be refreshed by the

winds. We must take our comforts where we can find them and not expect them to be embedded in a purpose-laced universe like some kind of gold ore that we can mine.

How to end this? Not sure. Only to say that the act of writing this, of deploying words against the void, has brought a measure of (temporary) comfort. What are all human efforts, from pyramids to operas, from conquests to sewer systems, from brewing the perfect coffee to honoring the dead, but exactly this: a momentary comfort in a string of momentary comforts interspersed with the on-going rejection of gravity until it can be rejected no more? This is the fate that the spiritual, as I've tried to describe it, tries to voice, in the hope that we can—I can—live large rather than small, rise high in order to fall in the most graceful, beautiful, gentle way that I can.

(January 2013)

Ω

Why Should Religious Beliefs Be Defended?

The default position these days seems to be that a religious belief is an unimpeachable excuse for someone not doing what they are responsible for doing. A government official can refuse to issue marriage licenses because she believes gay marriage is a sin. A pharmacist can refuse to fill a prescription for birth control because he believes that contraception/abortion is a sin. A politician can get legislation passed that uses government power to legislate a person's identity, as in the situation of transgender people and bathrooms, often motivated by, if not explicitly stated, a belief in the sinfulness of non-standard gender identity. Even the legal fiction known as a corporation can invoke religious beliefs to deny employees reproductive health care coverage.

Religious belief seems to have effected its own version of “regulatory capture,” similar to what corporations do when they colonize the regulatory agencies charged with overseeing them. I think the time has come to stop giving religious belief such power by demoting it from its current protected status to make it co-equal with all other belief systems and returning it to the private sphere of the individual believer.

One might argue that a hostility towards religious belief is un-American, but as Susan Jacoby shows in *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, opposing religious belief has been vital to shaping the character of the country. Some may argue that the greatness of the United States comes from being a Christian nation, but Jacoby shows that it's equally true that whatever greatness American possesses comes from a strong antipathy to theologies and a concurrent respect for skepticism and rationality.

And while she doesn't state it explicitly, Jacoby's history shows that when religion supports social justice (as in the resistance to slavery or the fight for civil rights), its power to transform increases as its values come closer to a shared universal secular humanism and more distant from their theological underpinnings. This is similar to the way the ability of religion to explain the physical world weakens as science becomes better at modeling reality. No longer does nature send hurricanes to punish the decadence of human society no matter how fervently one may believe that.

Would demoting religious belief be unconstitutional? No, because the Constitution has no affirmative defense of religion, only prohibitions against government action in support of or against religions and their believers. Thomas

Jefferson advocated for a wall between church and state for a good reason: religion allied with state power more often than not led to bloodshed, and if not bloodshed, then a stifling conservatism.

Jefferson's wall also ensured that religions could maintain their integrity and thus their authority. A collaboration between religion and politics inevitably degrades both the principles and effectiveness of each to do what they are designed to do. Jefferson knew well the limits and dangers of theocracy.

"Theocracy" is, in fact, the dividing line here. I have no problem with the existence of religions because people in American society have the protected right to congregate and celebrate whatever arcane belief-sets they want, whether that be a resurrected man-god or whatever the flavor du jour at Meetup. No one will be persecuted (at least in theory) for associating with others who share a set of beliefs.

The problem comes when one of those belief-sets, dubbed "religion," uses theocratic principles to sculpt a democratic society into its own image. Democracy and theocracy cannot inhabit the same place and time. The United States can't be both a nation under Christian law-principles and a secular inclusive democracy. Why? Because of the direction of obedience: the former points to a divinity as the source of power, the latter to the people. There is no middle ground here: either the Bible or the Constitution must rule. (And no cheating, either, arguing that God works through the people and their Constitution, as if the Constitution were an added book of the Bible. It ain't so.)

How could we de-religion (awkward coinage) the United States without violating the Constitution? Start with getting them off the public dole. This is part of a larger discussion about all organizations that have been awarded 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit status. As Mark Oppenheimer pointed out in a *Time* article on June 28, 2015, titled "Now's the Time to End Tax Exemptions for Religious Institutions," the "exemption-and-deduction regime has grown into a pointless, incoherent agglomeration of nonsensical loopholes, which can allow rich organizations to hoard plentiful assets in the midst of poverty." (John Oliver pointed out these absurdities when he legally turned his show, "Last Week Tonight," into a church.)

Eliminating subsidies for religions by reforming 501(c)(3) is a start, if for no other reason than it gets the government, in the form of the IRS, out of the business of deciding what is and is not a religion (an act which is in direct contradiction of the First Amendment). The same can be said for any "faith-

based” funding from the government to provide services. No country with a clear vision of social justice uses churches to provide soup kitchens for the homeless.

The next step is harder to take because it requires defenders of secularist/humanist/atheist values to demonstrate that religious influence is not automatically a benign influence without, at the same time, looking like they are saying that religious belief should be repressed.

For example, it is not out-of-bounds to point out that fundamentalist vitriol about abortion has fed violence and assassination. It is not out-of-bounds to point out that religious liberty should not be used as a license to discriminate in hiring or deny health care coverage. It is not out-of-bounds to point out that installing a stone monument to the Ten Commandments in a courthouse is government establishment of a religion, which is illegal.

Again, people can believe whatever they want. But in a democracy like ours, the founding documents name the people and not God as the authors of power in the society because of the founders’ clear understanding of the evil effects of an alliance between state and church. This is a distinction that must be maintained.

The secularist/humanist/atheist defenders must also make an affirmative argument for their values as well and show that the nation has been well served by its freethinking traditions: the task is to make Robert Ingersoll as much a household name as Pope Francis. And we need to inject some soul and fire into the undertaking. We can’t kiss the Constitution as some kiss their Bibles in a show of veneration, but neither can we be all cool and rational about our passions for liberty of conscience.

I believe that all belief-sets, whether based in divinities or science, should be put on an equal footing. This is not persecution but equalization. No good social purpose is served any longer by exempting religions from the strictures placed on all of us as citizens.

(June 2016)

Fire Suppression Leads To Thought Expansion

One of the Saturday morning radio shows on WNYC in New York is *Reveal*, produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting, located in Emeryville, California. The Center and Reveal do vintage journalism – ask questions, pursue leads, verify sources, afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.

A recent broadcast called “America’s Ring of Fire” examined wildfires in the United States, which occur far more often every year than I realized and are a little-known scourge throughout the country.

Reporters on the show interviewed many officials in charge of both putting out the fires when they start and trying to prevent them from happening. These interviews inevitably touched upon the border conflicts between human desires and the physics of the natural world.

I heard many experts talk about their work, and in listening to them, I admired how they married a broad understanding of science with sweaty physical work on the ground. Each anchored each, and as they talked in close detail about what they do, I felt that they were people I could trust: savvy, modest, committed, steeped in the “thingness” of their world, quick to admit their limitations, prompted by what the Jews call *tikkun olam*, repairing the world.

I wish that all members of our political élite exhibited this same trait of acting from knowledge earned rather than ideologically birthed. Do not propose eliminating food stamps unless you have tried for a year to live on the income that qualifies you for the benefit. Do not diminish access to health insurance unless you’ve had to deal with medical bills and an insurance company’s indifference.

Such a litany of prerequisites would be a long one, but, in short, don’t act like you know how people live their lives until you actually sweat along with them as they sweat through their lives. Until you do that, you have no authority to act on their behalf.

I’m not going to hold my breath, though. I am thankful we have people like the wardens and biologists featured in the *Reveal* program, and not everyone in the political élite is clueless about the lives of ordinary people. The trick today is figuring out how to organize this competent class so that they can suppress Twitter wildfires, weed out the underbrush that allows apparatchiks to hide their schemes, and arrange our territories for sustainable growth.

And these fire suppressors do, we should also do within the provinces of our own lives – clean out our ideological tinder, scale down our own blowhardiness, and let facts put out the embers of hubris.

In many respects, America has always been burning because a country founded on violence and division will always smolder, always rise to a whirlwind to sear the land, and there is always a whirlwind to oblige. As Taylor Mac showed in his epic 24-decade history of popular music, much of American life is fired by a history of pain and damage, making Americans lean readily toward apocalypse and rage.

But none of our history fates us to anything. “America’s Ring of Fire” will consume us all if we let it, and it won’t if we don’t. It’s that simple.

(July 2017)

It Is a Lie

"I always thought old age would be a writer's best chance. . . .Now my memory's gone, all the old fluency's disappeared. I don't write a single sentence without saying to myself, 'It's a lie!' So I know I was right. It's best chance I've ever had." (Samuel Beckett to Lawrence Shainberg, quoted in *New Yorker*, September 12, 2016)

This quote caught my eye while I was thumbing through the old issue at a laundromat because this is how I feel these days, that everything I write is a lie.

But what do I mean by "lie" and what does Beckett mean by "best chance"?

I used to think that even if I wrote about something that others had written about before, that thing hadn't been written about by me – that is, because my "me" was the only one of its kind in the universe, it had an automatic fresh take, a "unique perspective," and that made what I wrote worthwhile.

Now I think that even if such a fresh "me" exists (an iffy thought), I feel like I'm only adding to a pile of cultural sameness whose prime law seems to be distraction and endearment – distraction from our predatory politico/capitalist regime and, at the same time, endearing us to the havoc so that the system can continue.

So, the "lie" I'm writing is not an untruth – alternate fact, fake news, that sort of thing – but it becomes, to use the generation-revealing lyric, "another brick in the wall." My special "me" doesn't liberate anyone or anything.

And so the question shifts to "Why write?"

Possible answers. Because I simply enjoy the act. Because adding light to a dark night is a good thing, even if, at the moment, it seems the darkness prevails. Because if what you do improves the life of even one person, then what you have done has worth.

All useful self-ratifying excuses – but they come from a sentimentalized Christian ethos that underlies most art work in our culture: self-sacrifice as a good thing, the disciplined life in a wayward universe, the virtuous upward fight against gravity, that good (of some type) will/must win out.

But, of course, this ethos is a lie of the feel-good sort. In art, people will demand that the brave win out over the rogues and will swear that they do want their hearts touched and souls moved to make them better people.

But life as actually lived outside of theaters and museums does not seem ruled by the values people said they sought in the art they took in. Unlike religion, where values are turned into rites and duties that root life in a manufactured meaning, art can give us the feel of living life properly, with compassion and grace, but eventually, like anything that's consumed by humans, it leaves behind more waste than progress, and while the spirit is willing, the flesh is, indeed, weak.

If I take the word "lie," though, and shine the light of "best chance" on it, I think I see clearer what Beckett was getting at. The lie is not an untruth but a solvent. It is the opposite of the certain, the ordained, the fated, the theological.

And old age is the last best chance to tell the lie, to be dissolute (which comes from "dissolve"), because, hopefully, by that time, with memory and fluency gone (both being tools that distract and endear), there is nothing left to either gain or lose by the writing, and freed from achieving an end, the writing can just be, saying what it pleases, wide or thin, with tight grain or veiled fog, freeing the writer and reader from any orthodoxy that sells a certainty or any art that promises a benefit or any advertising that says a thing can replace a soul.

Now I see what he was meaning. This is my best chance. And so, using another Beckett quote (amended) – "Lie again. Lie better." – let the dissolute begin.

(August 2017)

Niggerized

Cornel West has the used this term, though I am sure he isn't the only one, to describe a state in which American non-black people are now being treated like American black people, which he described as being "unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated."

Non-black people do not like being niggerized, but that has been what's happening since about the mid-1970s, when economic/political decisions kicked off the hollowing-out of the middle class and the misery-making social and income inequalities we have today.

What do these niggerized people do? They elect Donald Trump to un-niggerize them because Trump promised to return to them the right to feel superior and entitled. This rhetoric, of course, comes across in code, voiced strongly in works like Arlie Russel Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*: they have cut in line, they have gotten unearned benefits from the government, they haven't followed the rules, they don't hold themselves accountable like I do for myself. They feel that these people have stolen something from them, and they want it back: "Make America Great Again," "take back our country."

The condescension, hypocrisy, whinging and fact-ignorance displayed by the newly niggerized has now been valorized by our government and our media, who are collaborating to honor their pain and do what can be done to restore their pride and make manifest their nostalgia. After all, there is money to be made in this and power to be gained.

In the meantime, those for whom being niggerized has always been their way of life continue to be "unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated." See Castile, Philando.

America does not seem to have a way out of this polarity. The original sin of slavery cannot be erased, nor can the requirement that every niggerized group that wants to un-niggerize itself must offer a blood sacrifice to get the blessings of freedom and democracy. Sometime more than one sacrifice – many more. With no guarantees.

America is at a dead-end. Its politics, at least those practiced by the professional Washington politicians, is a politics of niggerization: how much can we impoverish and demean some groups so that our favored groups get more

favors: how poor can we make the poor so that the rich can become richer? That is conservative politics today. And the more liberal politicians mirror their conservative peers, the less able they are to make a convincing case that they can protect those who are “unsafe and unprotected, subjected to unjustified violence, and hated.”

America has always been a collision sport with a long and deep trail of casualties. (There is a reason why football is a nationally hallowed sport that will never be derailed because of its concussive damage – it mirrors perfectly the national id.) It is time for other solutions. Here is mine.

I have always thought that the civil war of the 1860s never ended but has simply continued in ultra-slow motion and that this current iteration of America is just another phase of the warfare. This simmering civil instability is America’s most stable heritage – and perhaps it should provide the guideposts for moving forward.

Let us authorize the continuation of the secessionist impulse of the 1860s and divide the land into Swiss-style cantons organized by a new Articles of Confederation. No longer would we be harassed by our guilt or embarrassment over not fulfilling the lofty ideal of “E pluribus unum” – instead, we simply create institutions that reflect the reality of “from many come many, not one, people” (my Latin is not up to the translation) and divvy up the common wealth so that all can get a fresh start.

In this way, the niggerized, either newly minted or always-have-been, might have a better chance at life, liberty and the pursuit of their happinesses with less concussive injury than under the current management. There would also be the ancillary benefit of diluting the American imperial project, which has niggerized countless people across the globe.

Have your own solution? I’d love to hear it. And while you’re mulling it over, hear the fiery tones of Cornel West at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNly7I-eW5A>

(August 2017)

Flinders and a Lather

I find it very difficult these days not to be in a lather from the moment I wake up. I sometimes think of Weehawken, where I live, as one of those small shires in Middle Earth suddenly blackened by the stain oozing outward from Washington D.C. (with minor shadows added from Trenton while Chris Christie still roams the governmental grounds). Weehawkenites have sensed all along that something out there was not right, was not well, but this week, with the coming-passage of the Republican mangle called tax overhaul, the illness has crossed our boundaries, soon to punish us and our fellow New Yorkers for not being of the evil lord's clan.

But there is always more to lather the lather. Religious choice being used to undo equality. Gun-toting in all fifty states. Absolving Israel of its colonialism by moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. Countdown clocks on the NYC subway system that aren't correct. The vulnerable minced: DACA, children's health insurance, immigrants ICE'd and families destroyed. The coming patriarchal backlash to #MeToo and a zombie white supremacy still upright married to a zombie racism that seems ineradicable.

I understand why Trump's MAGA call rang brightly inside so many skulls. I don't know if my parents voted for Trump, but they clearly have in their heads an "again" that they would love to see re-enacted in a modern age that has turned strange and dangerous for them (call it "strangerous"), and so do millions of others, who would like the return of the old power structures and comforting vocabularies of virtue and exclusive social membership.

On the other hand, it's not as if the United States hasn't achieved greatness in the past, if by greatness we mean something like building a mass industrial society on our rickety democratic infrastructure that did improve lives across many measures and did not implode (too much). That did happen, and while, rightly, we should point out the suffering that this national enterprise caused and still causes, it is still an achievement of great significance and should not be abandoned, either rhetorically or actually.

It is also important to hold onto the fact that the current corporatist anarchy of our politics is not the only politics this country has ever known. Plenty of voices have described different measures of "great," and plenty of movements have tried to turn those words into actions and institutions, sometimes even succeeding: Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and whatever is left of the

“safety net” as well as local and regional experiments to test out “quality of life” arguments about the proper mix of markets, science, and communal living.

For me, the current Trumpian definition of “great” is pinched and greed-worn. I read a piece about the fact that, today, black mothers are three times as likely as white mothers to die from complications of child birth; in New York City, the ratio is 12 to 1. The probable cause? “The discrimination that black women experience in the rest of their lives — the double whammy of race and gender — that may ultimately be the most significant factor in poor maternal outcomes.” The moment of death for these women begins long before they’re giving birth. It begins in the wear and tear on the body of living in a racist society, and that begins at their own births.

Why is solving a situation where “black expectant and new mothers in the U.S. die at about the same rate as women in countries such as Mexico and Uzbekistan” not part of our “great”? Why are we not great in every measure that any civilized society would consider crucial to being civilized, like the measures included in the Human Development Index? Why does Norway best us every year? Why are we not inventing and deploying more revolutionary technologies? Why do we have to tremble as we ride our highways and cross our bridges?

Today, “great again” means the soothing of spirits wounded by a toxic nostalgia, and if our politics continues to use that as its lodestar, we will never be able to reconfigure ourselves, which means that black mothers will die, children will suffer from preventable diseases, and our economic lives will be premised on the lie of “trickle-down economics” and the mythical rationality of a mythical marketplace.

I don’t know how we get to a “great” that is certifiably great. Perhaps all we can do at the present moment is fasten our seatbelts for the bumpy ride, do what we can to keep the dark stain at bay, and hope that the democracy train doesn’t shake itself to flinders before it gets into the station.

(November 2017)

Virtual

My good friend is considering converting his money to Bitcoin and has taken enough steps to convince me that he is convinced this is a good move, though I am not at all convinced that his being convinced is a good move because I cannot, for all I read about it, understand Bitcoin's attraction and thus understand why someone would trust Bitcoin to both have value and hold value.

I do understand some things about this situation, though.

I understand the techno-libertarian delight in promoting a transaction medium not mediated by a government and distributed in a decentralized network and which eliminates the messy politics of human society through the grace of code. (Question for the techno-libertarian: why the unquestioned trust in a decentralized network when you have shown, through your own coding skills, the ability to hack into supposedly sacrosanct systems. Maginot Line, anyone?)

I understand that we exchange money virtually all the time (e.g., wiring or transferring dollars into an account) and that bit/byte money is just as actual as the paper in our pockets.

I understand that the value of any money is, in part, based on a faith in the institution issuing it that the institution will work to maintain its value and availability.

In short, virtuality powers our financial systems, but it does so in different ways at different levels. At the level of my making an online transfer, the electronic numbers sent back and forth are a much more efficient way to make the exchange than my taking \$100 out of my account, filling out a deposit slip, depositing into in that other account, and getting my receipt. The 1s and 0s make for a smoother and more auditable process.

But in the investing world, these virtual exchanges become a kind of commodity that can then be traded, as we saw in 2008. Once solid things, like mortgage contracts, became so virtualized that they eventually just melted away: the mortgage sliced into securitized tranches, which were then re-sliced into another "financial product," and so on until, at some point, the end-product had no connection to its starting-product, and no one had any control over anything.

Bitcoin strikes me in the same way. Yes, fiat money, issued by the U.S. government, is, in a way, a faith-based enterprise: I trust that the government will do all it can to maintain the value of the currency, and thus my faith in its

powers, so that I and others can exchange it for goods and services that promote our common prosperity. But it's not entirely faith-based. Or, rather, the faith has ties to tangible economic stuff that can inform it and strengthen it; the value is not just pulled from the air or made-up as we go along.

What drives the value of Bitcoin? Bitcoin's underlying blockchain technology is easy to understand because it's a ledger that can't be hacked (yet) to falsify transactions, thus making it easier to trust negotiations and enact contracts. And the miners in the system, who are doing all the verifications in the decentralized ledger to keep it honest, get a reward for their work: Bitcoin. But no one really knows how to value the Bitcoin rewards that miners are receiving. Any value assigned to Bitcoin seems arbitrary, and the volatility of the current run-up in values, driven in part by new Bitcoin futures exchanges, makes it unreliable as a currency.

Well, my friend will do what he will do and reap what he will reap, and I wish him great luck. My point here is not to explicate Bitcoin but to show how hungry humans are for virtuality, hungry to nest within virtual worlds, hungry to be driven by phantasms, demons, rules-of-thumb, and best guesses and distracted by the endless chatter within their brains, reified in the internet and social media. Visualize a human being as moving through the world enveloped in a fog that is also a screen running endless uncurated programming, all of it real, little of it really real, sleepwalking with eyes shut wide.

Man, that sounds so geezerish, doesn't it? The "all that solids melts into air" trope, eh? "I remember when reality was real and not virtual!" and so on.

But let us think dig into this a bit more. I'm not talking only about the technological virtualities of our brave new world because we employ other kinds of virtuality as well in our lives, such as political ideologies, religious dogmas, racial prejudices, all of which attack the real in the same way, by reducing complexity and uncertainty into a "just-so" story that can be used for distraction, certification, or both.

Just as modern humans hunger for their screens, they hunger for these other virtualities as well, and they have had a longer historical time to ooze their dark nostalgias into our veins and turn the world into a slaughterhouse several times over. We see this in our current American politics, we saw it in the Balkans after 1989, and the ooze continues to stain Europe and Russia and Asia today. Google may have created maps of brilliant cartographic detail, but

when it comes to the topography of a human being, large swaths are still marked with the faces of monsters and captioned with “unknown.”

These days I find myself resisting the Netflixing of life – finding the one streaming service to rule them all (and because there is no such single service, we are prompted to pay for many of them to stitch together a seamless streaming life). This also includes going to movies and plays, as well as reading fiction. I find myself mistrusting their intent, which feels very much like a cocooning or a softening of the realities round me – escapades for escape.

I find that I don’t want to be affected, I want to be tutored. I don’t want to be moved, I want to be schooled. Something serious and scouring and loving enough of me to wound me.

Modern science may describe reality, at bottom, as nothing but a stew of quarks and zizzing space, but we live at a Newtonian level of falling apples and cluster bombs, of bodies and suffering. This brings to mind favored words from Thoreau: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach...I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms....Be it life or death, we crave only reality. If we are really dying, let us hear the rattle in our throats and feel the cold in the extremities; if we are alive, let us go about our business.”

We need a better *thisness*, a different diet of real. Delete Facebook and its offspring. Read more, and read real books with bindings and heft. No plays or movies, art galleries – don’t trust the artistic impulse, too often self-indulgent and selfish. Talk with people and try to use a language that honors confusion and dismay and move us away from our certainties and judgments.

But not only these penitences for penitence’s sake, a dutiful shriving. Also needed is the infusion of satisfaction, maybe even joy, that comes from what Michael Benedikt calls, in *For an Architecture of Reality*, “direct esthetic experiences of the real”: “There are valued times when the world is perceived afresh: perhaps after a rain...or, alone, one sees again the roundness of an apple. At these times our perceptions are not at all sentimental. They are, rather, matter of fact, neutral and undesiring—yet suffused with an unreasoned joy at the simple correspondence of appearance and reality, at the evident rightness of thing as they are.”

He goes on to say that while our modernist selves profess that we live in a solar system of deconstructed worlds, “we are actually one-worldists when it comes to a good cup of coffee” and that “so familiar is the ring of truth, the tenor of reality, the ‘bite and sweet gravity’ (Sontag) of things real and beautiful that if we are, most of us, as I surmise, fairly expert at discerning what is really real from what is not, then there lies a tragedy of some proportion: we will not claim the expertise for fear of appearing unworldly.”

Perhaps this is what my resistance is all about: an effort to become worldly again, to leave Flatland and reënter the three-dimensional world of Spaceland, to pay a deeper attention to paying attention, to clear out the capitalist fogs and phantasms, to exercise my expertise in knowing what is whole and weighted and dense.

But I think it’s even more than that. It’s about reclaiming our mortality.

Becoming more worldly will give us a ballast that the virtual is designed not to give us so that we can admit what we are too afraid to admit about our human lives: that we don’t really know much of anything, we’re mostly powerless to change anything, our lives are mostly wasted, and we hunger for at least one moment of light before we pass away.

Techno-utopianism gets in the way of understanding this. Ergo, let’s get rid of the techno-utopianism so that we can redeem our own vaporous yet meaty selves and live lives that take deep joy both in the thingness of our world and the fact that our “too too solid flesh” will one day gently deliquesce. Becoming fully human in the age of machine learning—bone and gristle resolving itself into a dew—may be the most radical action one can take. And that seems to be the road I’m walking these days.

(December 2017)

Public Jewels

Each day I take the NYC MTA subway to work after a short bus ride in from New Jersey.

The subway has gotten a lot of bad press over the past few years, ranging from the Big-Dig-level costs of the two-decades-late Second Avenue Subway to the MTA machine shop that hand-manufactures parts that no longer exist anywhere on the planet for the aged signal system.

Add to the industrial challenges of running this nation-sized system the sniping between Governor Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio over funding, the regional quagmire about transportation financing, and the national infrastructure disgrace, not to mention the horrific stories of trapped passengers and the lesser headaches of delays “after an earlier incident at West 4th,” sick passengers, odorous street people, signal problems, the screwball rescheduling on weekends to accommodate repairs, manspreading, womanspreading, hip-hop dance routines (“It’s showtime!”), beggars (“I’m very sorry to disturb you, but can anybody...”) and the stumps who plant themselves in the doorways and don’t move: all this, and more, and a person might begin to wonder why people of sound mind and body would inflict the subway on themselves.

Several answers to this question. First, of course, most of the millions taking the train don’t have a choice: this is our Uber at \$2.75 a ride. Second, it’s efficient and economical, even with all its mechanical mangles and alchemical financing. Third, it’s one of the few places left in this unequalized city where the Walt Whitman multitudes have a chance to pass by and through each other and where our bubbles get dented, tried and spider-cracked by something real, smelly and felt.

This last point matters most to me. On the day of the women’s march in January 2018, I was waiting at 59th Street Columbus Circle for a train to Port Authority. I was looking down the track practicing my “subway suction” (a term from Garrison Keillor about pulling a subway into the station by the force of one’s stare) when a woman, who was also suctioning, turned to me and said that it was such a shame the subway was in such a shameful condition.

However, she didn’t say it with disdain but as a lament. She spoke about how the systems she traveled in Europe were better because their governing bodies saw the investment in the public space as good for the public and good for the whole society. A public good, properly managed, was a good that was good for

everyone because it reduced the coarseness of common life and strengthened a social patience with the inevitable bumps and grinds that come with humans living cheek-by-jowl to one another.

I spoke about how I saw the subway as this public jewel that deserved better treatment but would not get it in today's America since the country's reigning ideologies are invested in improving shareholder value and the corporate profit rate, and disdain anything to do with improving the quality of public daily life for daily people.

This disdain turns to cruelty when considering the fate of those unlucky enough not to be rich and down on their luck. If the ideologies could have their way, we would not have the poor (nor the black nor the brown nor the lame, halt and infirm) with us any longer. To ensure this happens without the negative fallout from a full-blown extermination campaign, the apocalypse is allowed to happen in slow motion through defunding health facilities, increasing deportations and incarcerations, starving the funds for public housing, work requirements for Medicaid, and so on.

For the price of the cost overruns on some unneeded weapons system, the subway could be fixed, with a maintenance endowment set up for modernization and improvements. But American conservative ideologues have a hatred of "the public" both as a concept and a practice, and subway neglect is one demonstration of this.

The U.S. postal system is another public jewel that deserves much better treatment. Instead, it is financially starved by a pension payment obligation that no other federal agency has to meet. (Two other sins for the ideologues: it is a strongly unionized organization that offers people of color an unprecedented opportunity for success and security.)

All complaints about crappy consumer service duly noted, but it sports the most sophisticated optical character reader system in the world as well as the most extensive address database, it has a presence in almost every municipality in the country, and it will bring a letter to the Navajo reservation in Canyon de Chelly for less than half a dollar, something the shareholders of FedEx or UPS would never do. (And it could provide low-friction banking services, as it once did in the early 20th century.)

Instead, we get Mick Mulvaney, Trump's budget hitman and the new head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, loosening the restrictions on the

payday lending industry, using the agency that had been created to protect consumers to enable the predators to feed on consumers more efficiently.

It maddens me to live in a place that does this. Yes, of course, we could band together to vote the bastards out and get our bastards in, but that's never really worked for any length of time, especially when it's not the bastards exercising the real power. There is a "deep state"—though it's not really *that* deep—where the crews at EPA and Education and Energy and HUD and Justice and the judiciary and fill-in-the-agency-name go about wrecking what few protections we have left against the incursion of the market into every corner of our lives.

These are damages that will really damage us, more than Russian trolling or an inept president or a Congress that "sucks" (Senator Joe Manchin's inimitable phrase), though these will do their damages as well (just ask those tagged as DACA).

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, Slavoj Žižek notes that conservatism is not a legitimate intellectual philosophy but is the backlash that comes when a revolution has failed to liberate people. In the United States, this means that the failure of even mild revolutions like the New Deal or Johnson's social programs has engendered over five decades of conservative efforts to make sure they never happen again (Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security, sort-of the last remnants of the revolutions, are clearly in the gunner's cross-hairs.)

I'm not a fan of large-bore pronouncements about the end of empires or equating historical periods (e.g., what does the fall of Rome teach us about the United States?), but clearly things are falling apart. For some reason, we are letting a niggardly conservatism punish us for ever having had any pretensions to creating a society consonant with the country's founding pronouncements.

I'll be first to admit that I don't know how to do this, but somehow we need to polish the word "public" to a lustrous revolutionary shine, "We the people, in order to form a more perfect union" should be the liberatory tagline of our common lives. Public assistance, public service, public space, public trust – we need to underscore the nobility and grace in these phrases while, at the same, weaponizing them as barricades against the class war being waged on everyone not in the census of the rich and powerful.

(March 2018)

Trumpgood

If there's one good thing that's come out of Trump's kleptocratic and kakistocratic reign is that it's forced many of us liberals to think about notions to which we hadn't given much serious thought, such as "citizen" and "patriot" and "progress" (as well as learning obscure Greek-based adjectives describing political systems). Like most liberals, I've held a lazy Whiggish trust that the long arc of history not only bends toward justice but also upward in progress (echoes of New York State's motto, "Excelsior").

Of course, this thinking goes, despite the country's original sin of slavery and its history of white supremacist nativist intolerance, the American experiment of granting more and more people democratic liberty will succeed, although they will have to pay a steep blood sacrifice to become a fellow citizen. That's just how we do it in these parts.

Trump's reign sticks a much-needed sword into the heart of this sentiment and thus liberates us from the false comfort of words like American experiment, American exceptionalism, "land of the free and home of the brave." This April, as we review the fifty years since the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., we may want to believe that King represents the best of who we can be, but it's more helpful to know that Trump (the phenomenon, not the person) displays the character of our country.

And what is that character? (I am going to wildly generalize here.) Americans don't mind being ruled by oligarchs, whether they be elected to office or run enormous corporations, as long as, at the end of the day, they aren't fleeced completely (the recent tax bill is a good example of this). Americans, in fact, find civic engagement too much work, or, to put it another way, most Americans feel that kvetching continuously without undertaking any repairs and then voting (maybe) once or twice a year is what civic engagement is all about.

The only thing Americans don't like more than poor people is helping poor people, but since the true American despicables can't just be allowed to die on the streets of a supposed Christian nation, Americans will find the most niggardly way to provide assistance, extracting maximum humiliation for minimal sustenance.

America's reputation for engineering ingenuity and inventiveness is undeserved these days since it can't keep its own house in order—bridges fall down, trains crash. And it can't do this because Americans won't tax themselves

(including corporations) to make the repairs, though they don't seem to mind having trillions of their tax dollars spent on killing people in non-American countries for decades at a time. Americans will revolt against taxes to fund their schools but not against militarism.

Americans love the misguided heroism of the individualist ethic, not only believing against physics that people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps but also enjoying the old anti-communist canard that collective action to solve a problem is despotism. Just look at how Senator Elizabeth Warren was vilified for stating the obvious truth that no one succeeds completely by his or her own efforts.

Americans don't like those who aren't Americans but want to be Americans. The high levels of cruelty in today's immigration policies don't seem to bother too many people, just as they are not bothered by the facts about the benefits immigration brings to the country. With righteousness in their voices they will declare that those who have broken the law by coming here must be expelled, though those same people don't seem to mind the law-breaking of their favorite politicians or corporate overlords. Law-and-order screeds are best delivered against those who have no power to fight back.

Americans are by and large an insular people, leery of "change" and second languages, and ignorant of the lives not only in the next country over but even in the next town over. Americans may have a cherished view of themselves as pioneers and explorers, but even if that's only a little bit true, the journey is never undertaken for self-instruction but usually for conquest, to efface rather than meet face-to-face.

Recognizing all this, and more, is a good thing for liberals, believe it or not. We don't have to keep up the fiction that fighting the excesses of the churl will make us "better citizens" and our country a "better country"—we don't have to play the role of disappointed redeemers trying to get people to deploy the better angels of their natures. We can admit that those angels are fictional characters, that Americans are a fraught mix of the good and the retrograde, and that American politics is something like being a lion tamer, directing the beast rather than dominating it with the hope that more good than carnage will be the result (and knowing there always will be carnage, and that the good will never be enough).

We can defetishize democracy and the American experiment, and we don't have to flatter citizens' vanity by telling that they are better and smarter than

they really are, or that their consent to being governed is really necessary to their being governed. Instead, we can respect them enough to say that we understand that they don't particularly like having to be citizens and that we'll try to keep our expectations of them reasonable: vote at least once a year in some election and try to get the news from more than one source. That's it. And if you want to put in a little more time and effort on, say, a politician's campaign, even better, but we won't be disappointed if you don't.

And while we're getting them to be good-enough citizens, we can hopefully get in a little Socratic education about what is real and what isn't, without expecting to make any real headway against their settled opinions and grievances.

Let us be more Stoic than evangelical about our democracy, let us be more disappointed than boosterish, so that we can keep a sense of proportion along with a sense of humor. (Trump is, if nothing else, always good for a few laughs.) And let's not oversell what we think America is or what it can do. It would be great if the country could just provide a decent standard of living for all its citizens. The world's policeman, leader of the world order—nice, but secondary to reducing infant mortality and mothers dying from pregnancy and buffering us from the brigands of the marketplace.

This more pragmatic attitude, though, is just a starting point. For me, anyone naming himself or herself a liberal in our day and age should commit to a fifty-year program of building a power-base from local town councils up to the Presidency, doing what the Republicans started doing in 1964 after the Goldwater debacle. The point is to seize power, not to share it with opponents, to become as the Republicans have become, only with a better socio-economic agenda, funnier jokes and a moratorium on conspiracy theories.

In the meantime, though, the country and its leaders won't provide a decent standard of living because the bulk of citizens think that Bernie Sanders is leftist and won't demand better behavior from their rightists in power. The citizenry, instead, has chosen to vote in clowns for entertainment, hunker in for protection (guns are optional), and nurture the Alex-Jonesian, white-male-fear-of-being-emasculated fever dream of the deep state in league with social justice warriors and LGBTQ snowflakes crushing the American conservative yeomanry in its politically correct vice-grip and fostering a new world order led by postmodern deconstructive French philosophes puttering around in limousines drinking lattés as they discuss how to impose a cultural Marxism (à la Jordan Peterson) on any survivors of their purge.

It's a bumpy ride by any measure. Cinch the seat-belt and hold on.
(April 2018)

Ω

Prosthetics

The Marvelous María Beatriz and I finally got around to watching *Blade Runner 2049*, Denis Villeneuve's upgrade of the 1982 version with Harrison Ford (who also appears in the 2017 version). Great on atmosphere, lame on story.

We also watched the original because the MMB had never seen it. Same outcome. I had forgotten that

American audiences did not at first take to the movie, in part because it's sloooooow (Sheila Benson from the Los Angeles Times called it *Blade Crawler*) and full of hyperventilated "philosophy" about playing God. And the rapey approach that Deckard (Ford's character) takes toward Rachel (the replicant he loves, played by Sean Harris) is retrograde and creepy.

But one idea shared by both movies is "prosthetic memory," a term from Alison Landsberg's 1995 article, "Prosthetic Memory: Total Recall and Blade Runner," in *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, reprised in her 2004 book, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*.

Landsberg defines prosthetic memories as "memories which do not come from a person's lived experience in any strict sense." If you watch a film or television program, you will have a memory of narrative events without actually experiencing those events in a corporeal way. Do this enough times with enough media technologies, and it becomes possible for human beings to possess, like the replicants of *Blade Runner*, vivid memories of experiences not their own.

Unlike actual prosthetics, which are supplements to the human body, prosthetic memories become so entangled with the ongoing process of memory-making in the brain and the relation of that process to forming an identity that it becomes impossible to distinguish between real and consumed memories.

Is this a problem that needs solving? Maybe. Fake news, for instance, is "successful" (whatever that means) because the items implant information in the brain that some people cannot disentangle from their own identities: they remember the information as if they had lived it in some way. This connects with the paracosm, a detailed imaginary world that, these days, not only includes Tolkien's Middle-earth but also something we could call Foxland.

But the problems of prosthetic memory, if any, don't have a solution because "solution" implies a distinction between a "pure" memory and a "purchased"

memory, and I don't think such a distinction exists for modern technologized human beings. I also don't think it squares with neuroscience research on memory formation and storage. One memory does not exist in one location in the brain but is spread across a neural network, and memories are constantly being edited and reformed according to the emotional needs of the organism. What we say we remember about an incident and the journalistic details of that incident are never cognate.

Does this lead directly to cyborgs in the era of the posthuman? Depends. Is it a problem if a person has memories implanted about visiting a place without actually visiting the location? Are the memories acquired through a virtual reality walk through the woods "lesser" in some way from an actual walk through the woods?

The problem, to me, is less about memory and memorizing per se and more about how we go about choosing the prosthetics that help us get through life. Humans are like web browsers. They can add extensions and plug-ins to extend their functionality, but with this one difference: browsers have been created to serve a particular purpose. Humans do not have such a comfortable destiny. We just keep adding prosthetics as we go along, hoping (if we even pause to think about it) for a combination that brings us some measure of fortune and comfort.

Should we take that pause, there are aids to guide our pausing. Svend Brinkmann's new book, *Stand Firm: Resisting the Self-Improvement Craze*, is a self-help book written to wean people off self-help books promoting positive thinking and multitasking productivity. In a couple of hundred pages he deflates the self-improvement hype and offers in its place a Stoic practice that aims to ground the reader in a wry skepticism toward the riches fanned out in front of us by our prosthetically driven technological regime.

We are cyborgs already—that began when human beings used their first tools to rearrange reality. There's no holding back the technological flood, but we do have ways to control what comes through the floodgates, to balance the meat-based and silicon-based life forms that reside within the local habitation of our brains and bodies. Each of us does have that control, though it's not easy to exercise it, as Brinkmann points out, especially in a time and place when fever dreams seem to rule the day and self-discipline is described by our capitalist overlords as retrograde and dangerous.

But resistance is not futile, however hard it is to resist. Using wry search algorithms in our browser brains will make us better cyborgs, and as better

cyborgs, we can tear through the paracosm of reality that cottons around us today right into reality itself. It will give us a bite of the chili pepper to clear our senses, as the MMB would say. And she is always right.

(May 2018)

Ω

Bring on the Machines

Much anxiety of late over machine learning, artificial intelligence and the robot advent. Some of it is fevered Skynet-style paranoia, but the increased use of these prostheses in human lives does raise important questions about a society driven by robo-capitalism, which I define as information being used to replace human workers wherever the owners of capital deem it profitable to do so. (For this essay, I am conflating all these terms into the word “robots” until I abandon the term for “information.”)

Replacing workers with machines is not new in capitalist practice – advances in productivity came about in great measure because owners of capital wanted to find ways not to deal with troublesome human beings. And I believe that the owners will continue to do this because, given the logic of the system to which they’ve tied their fortunes, they have no choice. Workers are a drag on profits, and all drags on profit must be whittled away.

Extending this logic of replacing human workers with robots, however, could end up destroying the other half of the capitalist equation, which is that profits come from sales, and sales must be made to people who need/want things. If the income to buy stuff is tied to work, but work for humans is eliminated, then there is no income to buy stuff and the humans become superfluous to the system. It’s the dilemma Henry Ford faced: if he didn’t pay a decent wage to his workers, who would buy the cars his workers made?

The rich can’t make up the difference, and since much of their income comes through rents, they will find that without humans with incomes, their rents will also suffer.

The coming of the robots forces to the surface those ever-present subterranean contradictions in capitalism where a system premised on growth is also whipsawed by the discipline of price, but it does it in a wholly new way: what is important about the robots is not the machinery but the information that powers them, and if there is one truth about the current market system, it does not know how to price information, as Paul Mason points out in his excellent book *Postcapitalism*.

This is because market allocation systems are based on scarcity, but information is not scarce at all, and oftentimes is free for the taking, as in the open-source software and hardware communities.

This gives capitalism a hard nut to crack. If it reduces purchasing power by eliminating human jobs, how will it generate profits? Some sectors could generate a gig economy, putting the onus of salary-making on “independent contractors,” but that isn’t a sustainable model for growth. Studies already show that the gig economy is an economy of impoverishment for its workers. It could, as it usually does, move pieces around the chessboard: offshore that, telecommute this, bring that other thing back on shore, and so on.

But at some point (probably not that far into the future), these avoidances will become like rearranging the deck chairs. Without conflict between labor and capital because labor has been eliminated, a falling rate of profit because there aren’t enough people to buy stuff, a marketplace that can’t price information, and where greed is no longer a strong enough incentive, what do we have?

We have Trouble, right here in River City, because the whole intellectual underpinning for this system crumbles, without any other vision with enough moxie to take its place (though I wouldn’t give up on communism just yet).

If I were king of the forest, I’d bring on the information machines so that wage work can be eliminated as quickly as possible, and I’d institute a universal basic income as a bridging measure while using the historical rupture to formulate an economic practice that might allow the planet to survive its humans.

All disagreements to this duly noted, but there is no option of muddling through this time. And how dispiriting is that phrase, “muddle through.” Human brains have an immense inventive capacity which can be magnified by the information and neuroscience technologies the human brain is inventing. The crude and exploitative economic system in which humans have mired themselves is certainly not the acme of human development, and perhaps for the first time in the history of their species, humans have the tools and fuel to build themselves out of the trap they’ve built themselves into rather than muddle through from one crisis to the next.

Our post-post-post-modern distrust of idealistic visions is well founded – much slaughter has been done in their names. We must engage with any grand vision carefully because a grand vision is both a beast and a blessing, but nevertheless we must engage or else risk just inching through our days until we don’t have any days or inches left.

(January 2018)

Unbelief We Can All Live With

Prologue

My father has often said he doesn't understand how a person without religious beliefs can have morals. For him, morals issue from the beliefs because the beliefs issue from God. We have morals because God exists, and nothing outside of God can mint a morality.

He doesn't go so far as to say that if you don't have God, you don't have morals because life showcases people all the time who do good works without God (or a god) to guide their lives. But that is the way his thinking would have to go if he did want to push it—toward fundamentalism, a worldview where only certain gospels of “right” deserve respect and protection, all else dismissed (dismissal ranging from shunning to beheadings).

I am my father's son in many respects but not in this one. That difference prompts this essay.

Origins: Part 1

The Catholic Church incubated me—a gentle incubation, hedged in by a little fear and shame but nothing hell-borne or crushing to suffer. I was a “good” Catholic as a kid, easing through the rituals of the first confession and first communion, and then upward to confirmation and altar boy.

I was an Air Force brat growing up, and like many things in the military, the base chapel was ecumenical and menu-driven. I remember attending a mass in a chapel at the age of seven (we were stationed in England). A usual priest performed the mass, along with the usual choreography, but when it was done, the Christian cross slid out of view, and in slid a Star of David, since the service on deck was Jewish.

Here is what that said to the seven-year-old: religions are swappable, all equal in value, none the first among equals. I could have stayed for the Jewish service and violated nothing. Religion on base was a buffet without infidels switchable without penalty.

(An aside. Military life, at least for me as a child, incubated other useful values. Except for its “defense” mandate, which eventually meant violence against others, the military was not a bad model of socialist and communal life, with a rough equality among races and classes (though not sexualities), essential services available to all, and a shared vocation that kept it all hanging together. Privatized market-driven societies have not even come close to this.)

I spent seventh and eighth grade in a Catholic school (St. Francis of Assisi in Goffstown, NH) because my parents felt it was better than the local public school. I had to wear a white shirt and maroon tie (clip-on—who had the time or patience to tie a tie?); girls, white blouse and tartan jumper, with knee-socks and black shoes. The nuns who piloted the school (under the steady gaze of the parish priest, who trundled over from the rectory every once in a while) considered the boys unredeemable savages and treated us like zookeepers. They treated the girls as unalloyed vessels of grace.

Of course we loved the attention, loved being named “bold and brassy,” which let us posture as rebellious without paying much of a penalty.

I have unpainful memories of sitting in the church soothed by its creaking wood and stained-glass light. I did my dutiful confessions, followed by my dutiful penances. I got the forehead ash cross on Ash Wednesday, did a mild Lenten self-denial, worked through the passion and resurrection of Easter, glided through Christmas, chewed the stale communion wafers. As an altar boy I helped the priests robe, stole sips of the communion wine (cringingly sweet), rang the bells, snuffed out the candles, did my proper genuflections, got a small tip for doing the occasional Novena.

Eventually, of course, the priests and nuns began to speak to us about “the call,” the vocation, usually around Easter, when piety percolated in our souls and the catechism resonated in our ears. It was their job to replenish the bench, these recruiters in cassocks and wimples, so they talked to us, talked to our parents, handed out pamphlets, made great shows of concern about the grace and mystery and power of “answering the call.”

Admittedly, though, a hard sell to pubescents, a life devoted to denying the body in order to better serve the resurrectionist mission of the Trinity, with the payoff being life eternal at the right hand of God. But I tried hard to grasp it, tried hard to let the verve of the priest’s words lift me above being a bold and brassy bad-boy into those reaches of spacious divinity that freed the body from fear

and loneliness and suffering, and suffused life with a grace that elevated and purified and made the whole enterprise seem worthwhile.

But the body pushed back, and while it was pushing back both hard and soft, I entered Bishop Bradley High School in Manchester, NH, and the classroom of Father Donald Lafond.

Origins: Part 2

The Christian Brothers ran Bradley for the boys; down the street and around the corner, nuns ran Immaculata High School for the girls. (These schools don't exist anymore, the diocese having consolidated them in 1970.) Again, the uniform of white shirt and tie and an added suit jacket. The brothers really tried hard to shoehorn us into the conventions of Catholic malehood of the 1960s. But they were swimming upstream on this one: the Catholic world felt less and less useful as a guide to a generation where many (though certainly not all) found liberation in anti-war politics and personal imaginings.

The curriculum had one year-long religion class for each of my four years, part of the Church's continuing indoctrination that would ensure its survival ("indoctrination" in the Catholic understanding of the word—to pass on doctrine in an authoritative way).

But that purpose didn't serve my purpose, bugged as I was by this continual clash without truce between the sacred and the carnal. So Father Lafond's opening gambits using the catechism of the time, the Baltimore Catechism, did nothing for me and to me. But, in line with Catholic teenage malehood of the 1960s, I did not challenge, I did not submit my interrogatories.

Then he surprised us. He passed out a book: *The Plague* by Albert Camus, the story of how the citizens of a city in North Africa are forced into becoming human beings when an outbreak of bubonic plague cuts them off from the rest of the world.

I won't summarize the book; plenty of summaries exist online. The narrator of the book, Dr. Bernard Rieux, compiles the narrative to bear witness to the suffering and to report, at least in his opinion, that when pestilence strikes and people have to act, there is more to admire than condemn in their actions—though the narrative presents a pretty close race between the praiseworthy and the despicable, with the former just beating out the latter by a hair.

What struck this 15-year-old sitting in a classroom dedicated to exploring and explaining the glories of God and his son Jesus Christ was the abandonment felt by those in the book who had always been taught they would never be abandoned by God. As far as I could tell, the God of love praised in our catechism puts in no detectable appearance in the book.

Also of great interest to me, in the character of Jean Tarrou, Rieux's fellow combatant against the plague, was Tarrou's firm belief that the only solidarity that mattered was not between people and God but among people and people. For him, the "plague" was not just the disease but also that tendency in human relationships for each to do harm to each. For true solidarity to exist, people must be forever vigilant about their capacity and impulse to harm others; they must take great care not to "infect" life with a death penalty. As he says: "What's natural is the microbe. All the rest—health, integrity, purity (if you like)—is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention."

I had never really had to think through the doctrine part of indoctrination: I just took it in through the communion wafer and incense and the confessional and the unreflective piety of the good Catholic boy and went along my merry way. Father Lafond had just upset all that—and while I didn't appreciate the intellectual discomfort, at the same time the intellectual discomfort thrilled me because it made me feel *alive*, something I had been all along but had not grasped because it had not yet grasped me.

Again, remember, all this ferment in the context of being 15 years old and a little bit "brainy," a reader who was also a first-string football player, an athlete with poetic leanings. Voltage, fizz, shock, revelation—think of all these all at once and the joy/fear that comes with their fusion.

What did this "alive" mean? And what did it have to do with doctrine?

At the time, as best as I can remember it, this "alive" expressed itself in two ways. First, in the gut. The British playwright Howard Barker talks about his plays as being the rope that pulls the drowning man from the swamp of artistic "feel-goodism" (my word, not his) that grips him. The man, grateful for the reprieve granted him by the art, treats the wound caused by the rope as a gift—the gift of honesty about the tragedy of life.

The gut-wound that made me feel alive came from the disjoint between the vital carnality of the fight against the plague and Father Paneloux's rectilinear sermons blaming his parishioners for bringing this pestilence upon themselves through their moral impurity. My immediate sympathies went to Tarrou and his volunteers, with Rieux and his nurses, with the suffering families, even with the black marketeers—in other words, to the densities of actual life, not the divine rarefieds. How could the man of God not see the Christian necessities in front of him? What was the worth of a doctrine that made a person blind to the dying right in his church and instead impelled him to rebuke and to shame?

The indignation: immediate. The immediate indignation: painful because of what it refuted of my life up to this point. The pain: vitalizing because the rope pulled out me of adolescent sloth into adult confusion.

The mind-wound came from that confusion—more accurately, from the struggle to wring a new vocabulary out of the old vocabulary for feelings the old words could not voice.

The unfaithing begun at the hands of Father Lafond and Albert Camus was also the moment when my integrity as a human being began, both in the sense of parts within linking to create a more whole whole as well as of emerging as a moral human out of my larval adolescence.

The unfaithing did not take long, which shows how shallow its roots were to begin with. I asked all the questions one can imagine a 15-year-old asking about the contradictions, paradoxes, errors, and obscurities within the creed I was being asked to accept “on faith.” Doubt became a duty, not a weakness. I suspect Father Lafond wanted just this reaction from his students because a faith untested is a useless faith—and bless him for trusting us.

But once unleashed, the testing will go where it will go, and for me, it dissolved all ties both to the Catholic faith in particular and to religious faith as a worthwhile human pursuit. Religious faith, of the sort dripped into my veins over many years, could not be trusted, and from the time of that reading to now, I have never trusted it.

Let's end this chapter with some levity, a play I wrote called *Booger*.

CHARACTERS: Paul, mid-40s but remembering back

SETTING: Sunday morning, Communion

TIME: Before the Catholic Mass started using English

MISCELLANEOUS

- Black alb and white surplice for a Catholic altar boy
- Small table or stool to one side holding a paten, small plate of Communion wafers, a bell, rosary beads

In the dark, a waft of Gregorian chant. Lights up on PAUL, standing dressed as an altar boy.

I can date my conversion from a rainy Sunday in October during a time before folk masses, when the Soviet Union was godless, when the Liturgy was anesthetically administered in Latin, and all boys, to the nuns, were brazen anthropoids and all girls were angels without any rebates.

PAUL falls to his knees.

I was a pious little prick back then: altar boy, Knights of Christ, CCD prize-winner for blatting back the Catechism. I had my warts, of course—but like everyone else I used them to polish my image because in the lacquer-smelling dark of the Saturday confessional, I could pump up the value of my spiritual stock by a penance spoken in the velvet throatiness of remorse. To be free of sin, one had to sin—and I did just enough to get myself cleansed without the inconvenience of being redeemed. In other words, I was a proper Catholic boy—ragged but definitely salvageable, just the way the nuns and priests liked to tenderize their young males.

PAUL rises, picks up the bell.

But at the age of 15—that smoldering inconvenient age—I discovered religious angst—or, more accurately, it found me. A priest teaching my literature class gave me Samuel Beckett to read

(rings the bell)

– and I pored over Beckett as the priests and nuns and Christian brothers, like a Papal press gang, went whacking the bushes for recruits. I tried to convince myself that God had placed a special “come hither” phone call to me—

(rings the bell)

– but then up popped Camus to clear the palate. I tried to squeeze the oil of vocation out of myself—

(rings the bell)

– but Sartre closed the bung-hole. By now, it was only a matter of time before 200-proof Marx and Engels heaved their bulk onto my doorstep. I asked for a sign, some guidance, as to what I should do.

Rings the bell.

The universe works in mysterious ways.

PAUL kneels again.

In those days, we fasted before Communion—not like Ramadan or any of those Jewish celebrations we were taught to secretly despise as heathen—just a matter of a few hours, really—a petite mortification of the flesh. Except that I was in high-octane anxiety about the very roots of my being. No, worse than that—I suspected that everything—those undigested Catechismal verses, the munched-on penances, the Pope’s finger-wagging encyclicals—was evaporating. Deliquescing. So I fasted from Friday fish dinner through Sunday Mass: no nibble, nosh, or guzzle. I figured if Jesus Christ Our Lord and Savior could quest in the desert for forty days, I could at least shrive my soul for forty hours or so.

PAUL stands.

By Saturday night I was glassy-eyed with hunger—a 15-year-old boy’s metabolism has no religious tolerance whatsoever. But I fasted on.

PAUL picks up the rosary beads.

I took laps around the rosary beads, read through the hagiographies of the most obscure saints possible, and, above all, tried to reach that empty-headedness I had always been taught was the spine of faith: a voiding out, a giving-up, a giving-over. All this for a deity who, in the last 30 hours, had not once bothered to give me a friendly slap on the wing-bone and say, “Go, boy!” He was tough to crack.

PAUL puts the beads down.

Sunday. I got the bells that day, which meant the other guy helped the priest out at the communion rail. I am kneeling there, the carpet nubble nagging my kneecaps, my temples pulsing like snake’s tongue, my soul welting up like someone whacking your ass with a wet towel—and still no sign. No sign. And for the first time, actual doubt—not just vague suspicions but real excavating doom—nicked a small tear in my soul’s fabric: what if—? what if—?

And suddenly at my right hand sat Estragon and at my left Vladimir, and I knew I was the moon hanging in that bone-dry sky. And I then knew this: I had been tricked. (I can't say if this vision was simply due to glucose-deficiency, but who's to say that low blood sugar can't lead to knowledge?)

PAUL kneels.

So the priest and his minion are "Corpus Christi-ing" along the communion rail and I'm wondering how I can exit stage left as quickly as possible. Distracted, jittery, I unconsciously reached up—I'd done this a thousand times, and confessed it in equal measure—I unconsciously reached up, dug a good booger out of my nose, and put it in my mouth. Well, almost in, because as I did it, as I became aware of the finger's arc, I realized my sign had arrived.

PAUL stands. He takes the paten in one hand. He stretches out his arms, the paten in one hand and the forefinger of his other hand extended as if it has a booger on it. As he speaks, he brings the paten and the booger slowly towards his mouth.

If I ate it, I broke my fast, that carefully suffered homage to my past beliefs. And thus no Communion, thus no common union. If I refused it—well, if I refused, then that meant I agreed to agree with everything, regardless of how much it defied my own being, forever. Forever. Who was I going to honor?

At this point, the paten is under his chin and his finger is at his mouth.

What do you think I did?

PAUL looks back-and-forth from finger to paten.

I had to make a decision quickly—they'd all been fed, and the priest was going to turn to me, the communion wafer moving toward me like a slow-motion bullet. The body of Christ—or my own body? Which one?

PAUL opens his mouth, pauses, puts his finger in his mouth, closes it, and pulls it out with a pop. He also takes the paten and holds it against the back of his head so that it looks like he has a halo.

My name was not going to be listed among the saints.

PAUL takes the paten down and puts it on the table. He begins taking off the garments. He folds and puts them on the table.

I kept my eyes down when the priest came to me. I'm sure he was puzzled. I wasn't. My finger tingled, the pointing finger, the finger of index. It was then that I began my conversion—into the delicious and absurd mayhem of the actual world, into its nurturing chaos and anxiety—in short, into my own air-born and doubt-ridden and without-a-net freedom. I dropped out of the altar-boy line-up, politely refused the priest's brochures about the Trappists, enrolled at the public high school—that den of iniquity!—, and secularized my sideburns. Some people saw this as a tragic loss of my heritage; I saw it as winning by a nose.

PAUL stands in his street clothes.

I really didn't have a choice. Actually, that's not true. I had been given the best choice of all—free and untaxed, with no damnation to pay, no one's nose out of infinite joint—exactly the way a god should make the offer. If I was going to pay through the nose, then I ought to have ownership of all the air that passes through it. And a gift like that was nothing to turn my nose up at, an insight as plain as the nose on my face. Was this an act of adolescent rebellion, or was it an act of mature faith? Look into your own hearts—you will know the answer.

PAUL makes the Vulcan sign with his right hand.

And may the force—the farce, the fierce, the finest—be with you.

BLACKOUT

Why?

Why such a severing response? Why give it all up in the blink of an eye? Of course there was the thrill. The indignation felt *good* to the 15-year-old, made him feel *engaged* and *consequential*, connected to Big Important Things. A little learning may be a dangerous thing, but to the learner, the *thrill* of the danger, the *gamble* of the rebellion, is part of the reason for risking the learning in the first place.

Of course there was the anger, for feeling misled. All the gestures and genuflections, all the worryings we had been put through about our souls, all the mouth-music of ritual and comfort—altogether empty, a “whited sepulcher,” as Jesus supposedly said.

But I think, for me, the greater part came from the delight I felt in using my brain. I had always used my brain, of course, but not in such a dissecting way and not with such focus. At an upper level I felt the dismay an investigator feels when the investigation uncovers the hidden corruption: “Who knew that such things were going on? I’m shocked!”

At a lower level, though, I felt *pride* at uncovering the information *by myself*. My thoughts, my conclusions, my insights: I both *authored* and *authorized* them. *Mine*.

Undergirding the dismay and pride was *relief*. This relief, though, did not just come from a weight removed. It also came from the liberation a new vocabulary gave me. No longer did I have to try to resolve conundrums like “Why does God allow children, who have committed no offense, to die?” The language of Rieux, of Tarrou, about a de-divinized universe driven by chance and uncertainty just made sense to me. The freedom gifted to humans by this existential indifference also just made sense to me. There was something clean and light about it that just made sense to me.

Of course later I found that this approach to living wasn’t so clean and so light, as the pages of *The Plague* themselves illustrated. But that didn’t invalidate it—it just made it more interesting and more raucous and more fertile.

The unbelieving gave me more satisfaction than the believing ever had. I have never felt a doubt about what I decided to leave behind. Good riddance to it.

What Is An Unbelief?

I originally intended to use “atheism” for this essay, but say it, and people think they know who and what you are, none of it complimentary. All the word indicates is what I *don’t have any belief in* (the divine, the supernatural, the heavenly other); it says nothing about the principles that do guide me. But that subtlety gets lost in the static.

Also, given the recent books about atheism and the strained back-and-forth among writers, readers, and critics on the topic, I thought I’d try a term that might trigger less animosity and righteousness, and that I wouldn’t have to define every time I used it.

So I am using “unbelief” in the way we might use “unbirthday” or “untimely” or any number of English “un-” formations as a way to say *the opposite of or the absence of*. Because I do mean the absence of religious belief, which means that I lack the conviction, the “faith,” that an extra layer of reality called the divine, engineered with its own physics, mixes its immateriality with our materiality to affect our lives: the hereafter, so to speak, influencing the here and now. (I do have faiths, but I’ll get to that in a little while.)

What else comes out of unbelief? I don’t have any interest in “proving” anything, such as “proving” that God doesn’t exist. Such “proving” is always exhausting and futile and unconvincing. The whole divine apparatus may exist as people have described it: let it be so. I just have no place for it in my life (I will not make Pascal’s wager) and therefore no obligation to pay it any mind. Unbelief lets me choose the moral principles that make sense to me and discard those that don’t, guided by the promise I make to myself never to believe that any one principle is The Principle and never turn fundamentalist and inflict my principles on others.

What’s the benefit? Tricky question to answer. Many would not see a life based on doubt, skepticism, and an embrace of mortality, contingency, and chance as especially positive. Where’s the comfort? Where’s the uplift and hope?

Unbelief doesn’t provide comfort, uplift, and hope because it’s not built to do that. Remember, unbelief signifies an absence of belief—the word describes a vacancy, not a curriculum or agenda. I find comfort, uplift, and hope in the comforting, uplifting, and hopeful things that humans sometimes do with their lives: saving children, honoring the dying, making sacrifices. *Why* they do them doesn’t matter to me: religious belief, political anger, being in the right place at the right time. What matters is that their actions reduce the amount of cruelty in the world, especially the cruelties humans have designed into their social systems.

Unbelief enlarges me by cleaning out the received opinions and conventional wisdoms that barnacle us as we pass through our days on this earth. It enlarges my liberty and demands I use all my faculties to draft my own picture of the world and not rely on any precept until I have tested it and chosen to accept it.

Crafting a moral universe entails a lot of work since I reject having a faith do it for me—though, in the end, I really only use one guide: wherever I am, reduce the amount of cruelty in the world. And I call it a guide rather than a

principle because I have no argument that can make it a Kant-like “categorical imperative” for everyone. All I know is that the guide chaperons my choices—it may not carry that power for others, and I have no authority to force them to re-construct the world in its image.

Unbelief: an active policing of my mind so that it does not become captured by enthusiasms and ideologies coupled with a thorough commitment to the notion that what we are in our bodies and minds situated in history on this planet at this moment is all there is, and when all of that is done, all of that is done.

Even Unbelievers Have Faiths!

Yes, they do.

All humans need this form of faith: the morning sun will appear in the east. That is, we can depend upon material reality (at least at a non-quantum level) to perform in predictable ways. We don’t know all the ways, and we don’t always understand the mechanics, so we end up having faith in something without a full working knowledge of it. But this is a provisional faith, a placeholder, until we understand all of it (and we will) through experiment and publication. This is a materialistic faith.

Then there are what I call the “dream faiths,” which use ineffabilities—divinities or spiritualities or a “right to be wrong”—as their authorities. In this country, we often privilege these dream faiths over materialistic faiths like science. Two quick examples.

The 2015 outbreak of measles in the United States stems directly from parental choices not to vaccinate their children based on a “right” they believe they have to act upon an error: the now-thoroughly debunked 1998 paper of Andrew Wakefield in *Lancet* linking vaccines to autism. The “right” of parents to put their children and the children of everyone around them at risk because of their chosen ineffability trumps scientific fact and social responsibility for herd immunity.

The second example is the argument over fetal personhood, where theology employs politics to wreak havoc on women’s lives. This campaign is anchored in a certainty that is not certain: the “moment” when human life begins. Even though it is impossible to pin down a universally agreed-upon specific “moment,”

whatever “moment” a speaker chooses (sperm meets egg or implantation in the uterus wall or a gleam in the parents’ eyes) gets a protection as a “religious” belief that actual women suffering actual harms don’t get.

(The denial that humans are causing possibly irreversible changes in the planet’s climate, a denial based on whim or ideology or both, is a third example.)

We could investigate how and why dream faiths get such a pass, but that is not what interests me most. Using religious faith as the most forward of the dream faiths (in part because it gets explicit Constitutional protection), what makes a belief a “religious belief”? The answer: because I, the religious believer, say it’s so. That’s it: a personal assertion. Nothing like proof is required. I can say I believe the most elaborate nonsense (e.g., Scientology) and get not only a tax exemption for it but also other legal exemptions, such as from laws against discrimination in hiring and benefits and service.

What should we do with the pharmacist who refuses to dispense birth control on the basis of a religious belief? Or the baker who won’t bake the wedding cake for the gay couple because their being gay violates his religious belief about homosexuality? What should we do in these instances where a dream faith is invoked to justify insulting, and possibly illegal, behavior or to avoid doing one’s duty, as with the recent bill in Tennessee that allows therapists to refuse treatment based on religious beliefs?

If the pharmacist wants to hold his belief, fine. In our country, the province of private theology is protected. He can hold it without fear of a rival religion burning him at the stake or the State sending him into exile. But his action violates the terms of the agreement he made with the State, in the form of his license, that allows him to practice his trade, and he should either lose the license or do his job. And if doing his job grinds against his religious belief, then he should find another job.

If the baker won’t bake the cake, then she should be fined, or at least penalized in some fashion that announces to the world the source of her belief and the injury it has done to other human beings (perhaps the way John’s names were published in the newspaper after a prostitute round-up).

In other words, the harm suffered should be suffered by the holder of the belief, not the customer coming in with a valid prescription or the willingness to spend money on confections.

Furthermore, where the religious impulse to impose a private morality on a public world clashes with a secular interest in all citizens being equally protected by the law—then the secular interest should win the day since its goal is to promote a social good (equal protection) rather than honor exemptions to that social good (a religious belief).

In practice, of course, we can never draw these bright lines that bright. But in general I don't think we can deny that dream faiths, especially the one called religious faith, get cut some slack that materialistic faiths don't (such as science and skepticism in its various forms). And a result of that easing off? A situation where, too often, people take righteous pride in holding inflexible (but unprovable) views about the nature of things and demanding the world conform to their dreams, often causing palpable harms to actual people.

But dream faiths aren't best tested or bested by damnation: that approach is too superficial. Any faith, dream or materialistic, reduced to purity, turns monstrous, whether it's a fundamentalist theology or a scientific socialism. Purity is an enemy of compassion and an eraser of complexity, and when we abandon complexity and compassion in the pursuit of the ideal, the bodies begin piling up. This is where the Hitlers come from, and this where we would come from as followers of Hitler if we were in that place and time committed to that purity.

There was a time when dream faiths had utility, during the earliest phases of human evolution. In fact, these dream faiths were the science of their times, an attempt, using existing technology, to explain how and why things worked the way they did. These explanations, like any good science, helped people survive.

But it is also clear that what we call science or the scientific method increasingly reduced the explanatory arena of those earlier "sciences": we know, for certain, that gods don't throw thunderbolts and demons don't cause illnesses. Today, shorn of the power to test and prove reality (i.e., creation science is not a science), these faiths promote themselves as moralities that protect us against a science based, they argue, on cold rationalism and heartless calculation. (My father thinks like this: "How can you know right from wrong if you don't believe in God?")

Personally, I look forward to the further withering away of the dream faiths' power to direct our conversations about purpose and destiny. For an individual, they may have some private and personal use, but their conservatism and rigidity make them unreliable social, political, and economic guides. Despite

their good intentions to improve our fallen natures, more often than not these faiths become scolds and inquisitors rather than inventors and nourishers.

(And to the degree that they don't turn cantankerous, these dream faiths begin to morph into secular metaphors to guide right conduct. For example, the Quaker notion of the divine spark in each human being becomes a useful way to talk about behaving as a conscientious human being; there doesn't need to be an actual spark in order to inspire people to behave as if there were a spark. At this point, the faiths become vocabularies we language-users can use as a metaphorical influence on our behaviors.)

However, for me at least, "science" doesn't automatically fill this instructional gap. The scientific method and its moral offspring like utilitarianism promise a false precision about how to calculate the good. The good cannot be calculated in the way an equation or algorithm is calculated—moral calculation requires an entirely different set of actions and authorities.

What are those? They all depend on the time and place in which the humans doing the calculations find themselves. Or, to use the vocabulary I've been using here, they depend on the materialistic faiths available to them, which for us current humans include not only science and corporate capitalism but also the social sciences (including psychology), built-environment disciplines like engineering and architecture, the digital technologies, and, to a limited degree, the arts (such as design and visual/graphic communication).

How all these faiths can combine to create moralities for us (that is, guides for right and virtuous action) goes far beyond this essay or my intelligence. But others have been making this amalgamation, fusing and mixing and promoting and practicing and building a repository of new approaches and possibilities that can be tapped when the current played-out and corrupt structures that govern our lives finally expire.

Our salvation as a species (assuming it should be saved), given the cascading collapses going on around us, will not only require the wholehearted deployment of our materialistic faiths but also a companion politics that will enable their employment. (Our politics today cannot do this work.) The role of the dream faiths will be to encourage their holders to sign on to the program and see it as the fulfillment of their theologies' promises. Otherwise, they should just tend their own gardens and not interfere.

To paraphrase the Roman playwright Terence, “being a human, nothing human is alien to me.” But also another Terence paraphrase: “People can’t be what they can be if circumstances don’t allow it.” Let us invent better material circumstances for ourselves, using what we have learned from our material faiths, since such circumstances create our essences, history creates our salvageable selves, time and tide create our moralities.

Stay tuned!

The Spiritual

In music, the “spiritual” sings out about ultimates: grace, h(e)aven, grounds of being, doubt, pleading, rescue. It voices comfort and complaint, reaffirmation and reprimand. Under it all, though, is the assumption—no, the certainty—that a listener listens on the other end, that a Promiser offers the Promised Land.

But what does spiritual mean if one cannot believe that a listener listens at the other end of a prayer? Cannot believe that underneath the grave contusions of life an order and meaning, while difficult and often opaque, nevertheless reigns?

“Spiritual” need not disappear just because no one may reside in the Celestial Home. To me, “spiritual” is a vocabulary we can use to talk about those challenges in life that our other vocabularies—mathematical, political, artistic, economic, and so on—can’t parse with a satisfying emotional response.

To talk about the state of one’s “soul”; to focus on ultimate meanings; to lift the body and its mind beyond the immediate and guard them against abrasion and evaporation; to seek out principles for conduct that have more tenacious roots than the instrumental and utilitarian; to craft a “long view” that also doesn’t scant the vibrancy (if narrowness) of the short view; to exercise a short view of things infused with the long view; to act with purpose even when no overarching purpose is clear; to have a bias for courtesy in human dealings (oh so hard in New York City—a true Christian challenge is this city!)—these are spiritual self-dealings freed from a Divinity, a pagan-like approach to life that searches for reasonings to do well rather than ill, good rather than evil, against a backdrop of a cosmic void, crimped understandings, and the ever-present danger of bad wine.

I would, hoary unbeliever that I am, go so far as to include strictly religious vocabularies as well in this spiritualizing, specifically the Bible's words, not because the Bible has any authority to it (it can't be the Word or words of God if I believe there is no God to word it) but because it offers templates with which to think about the purpose and direction of life. The Fall, from a state of ignorance/innocence into self-consciousness: is this not our animal births? Cain and Abel: not only the conflict among blood brothers but also our seeming destiny as humans to harm those whom we say we love. Jesus Christ: the ache for redemption, for a new beginning shorn of past sins—is this not the American ache for reinvention and moral avoidance? Jesus Christ again: the historical example of how a blood sacrifice is required for even the smallest advance in human dignity and freedom.

These templates, these ready-mades, give a narrative shape to the babble around us so that we can listen to ourselves trying to understand ourselves.

For instance, in John Gardner's novel *October Light*, the elderly dairy farmer James believes that gravity governs our moral lives. To him, gravity is always dragging humans toward the earth, toward compost and brutishness. Humans must push upward against the decomposition and steer our animal natures toward spirit. This struggle against our inevitable dissolve gives meaning to James' life.

In other words, James' life has a spiritual dimension even though he is not too sure any Lighthouse Keeper guides the wandering ships upon the sea. This vocabulary, this way of telling his life-story to himself, gives shape to the shifting (and shiftless) and populates the void with meaning.

Of course, using, for instance, the vocabulary of the Resurrection is not the same as believing that the Resurrection happened; it's only about using a palette to paint something, about jury-rigging our way through our days, doing the best we can with limited information and resources in a world/universe indifferent to our fates.

This can—does—tire one out since the struggle only ends in death and all successes are temporary and brittle (and usually forgotten by everybody). In fact, I think those who choose a home in religious faith choose to avoid this struggle—I can't blame them, for who would fardels bear? But I can't agree with them either—for me, without the thorny path and the inevitable defeat, there can be no robust joy and satisfying arrival. Or, in James' words, without the upward push against ravenous gravity, there is no chance to absorb the sun and be

refreshed by the winds. We must take our comforts where we can find them and not expect them to be laced through the universe like a vein of gold ore that we can mine.

Endings

I don't think I've answered in full measure the question hinted at in the title: Why is this unbelief something by which we can live, and why should it take the place of, say, the kingdom of God?

All I could do to answer that question would be to explain why it works for me and to narrate the life I have lived that has led me to this place. In fact, more precisely, it would be a narration of *all the words I have spoken* that have led me to this place, since it is only through the speaking of the words that I have formed what Richard Rorty calls my "final vocabulary." I can do this narration only for myself; the narration can't speak in any universal way for anyone else. Each individual has to craft his or her own chronicle.

Someone can use the narration of "the kingdom of God" as a final vocabulary—in a liberal democratic society, we should protect that private freedom. But, to me at least, it's an old vocabulary whose metaphors have lost their power, whose lexicon jars against that narrative shape given to our world by the lexicons of science, psychology, architecture, art, and so on.

(As an aside, though: the lexis of the "kingdom of God" can be refreshed if it's repurposed as, for instance, a political inducement for action, that the purpose of the political action is to bring the "kingdom of God" to those already on the earth. Then it can become a language for political change by redescribing how one can live one's life.)

Unbelief gives me a vocabulary better suited to my efforts to give meaning to my life because it is unfixed to divinity, "humanity," the "universal", a "world out there," and all those terms that propose a final authority for what humans do. Unbelief is unauthorized and private, and a basic working principle of unbelief is never to accept any vocabulary as "final": there are always new metaphors to add and use to (re)describe a life/my life that wishes to add and use whatever it can to imagine itself into being.

This is why the vocabulary of unbelief guides my life better than a sacred vocabulary or a transhumanist vocabulary or any vocabulary that proposes an

“out there” which we are supposed to discover and then to which we should conform our lives and language because it provides a basis for “truth.” I much prefer the liberty of making it up for myself based on all the vocabularies surging around me of all those other people also making it up as they go along, in great part because that’s how “life” appears to me to work: evolution at all levels, from biology to cosmology, is nothing more than an involved process of making it up as time goes along.

Should you do it this way? Don’t know—unbelief requires a taste for irony and a tolerance for ambiguity. But even if you used “the kingdom of God” as a final vocabulary, that vocabulary is not without its own ironies and ambiguities, and it’s a lot of work to stretch yourself to fit them in and still maintain that the vocabulary’s authority is consistent and fully explanatory and worth believing.

Too much work for me. Better to go straight to the irony and ambiguity and find my home there.

How to end this? Not sure. Only to say that the act of writing this, of deploying words against the void, has brought a measure of (temporary) comfort. What are all human efforts, from pyramids to operas, from conquests to sewer systems, from brewing perfect coffee to honoring the dead, but exactly this: a momentary comfort in a string of momentary comforts interspersed with the on-going rejection of gravity until it can be rejected no more?

This is the fate that the unbelief, as I’ve tried to describe it, tries to voice, in the hope that we can—I can—live large rather than small, rise high in order to fall in the most graceful, beautiful, gentle way that I can.

(May 2016)

It's Okay To Be Angry (Just Be Angry At The Right Thing)

(NOTE: This was meant to be a longer piece, and may one day achieve that status. For now, though, I offer it as a sample of how I think about these things.)

So much anger streams through the veins of the American body politic these days. Why?

Before I venture an answer, let me make some distinctions.

First, I want to distinguish between the anger an individual feels and the anger “felt” by a “society.” The former involves actual biological effects felt by an actual body; the latter only borrows this actual-body metaphor to get an analytic handle on a collective condition since a society, not being an actual biological entity (except in a very remote sense), can’t feel anger in the same way I can feel anger.

What does the analytic handle tell me? Anger in a body politic is not a simple amalgam of the individual angers of the individual humans in the crowd. Instead, the “anger” referred to in news reports or academic papers works as a short-hand or a code for a collection of deeper fears and dislikes within the individuals, things which they may not easily express or access or might be ashamed to acknowledge (e.g., immigration means the end of white privilege, Jews love money).

And because anger is an emotion that draws on the short-fused and the volatile for the energy of its expression, it may have no interest or capacity (if I can anthropomorphize it for a moment) in reflection, dialogue, or the falsification of its theories (that is, a reality check).

However, collective anger rarely stays in this scattershot state because those deeper fears can be groomed to serve other ends, from a basic mob to enforce a policy of terror to a disciplined political movement aimed at revolution.

Therefore, when I say that “much anger streams through the veins of the American body politic these days,” I am referring to anger political parties (mostly, but not entirely, conservative in ideology) and the media have cultivated. The former want to discipline and control citizens to maintain power and the latter want higher and higher profits. This societal anger is an induced situation, an

arranged condition, not a “natural” situation arising out of a “human nature.” It may have a base in individual grievances about wrongs and declines and assaults on traditions, but its social display is in the nature of an entertainment – scripted, produced, broadcast, reviewed, and revised. In being created this way, the anger’s managers betray the people in whose voice they say they speak so that they can achieve other ends connected to power and control. These ends have nothing to do with promoting the welfare and well-being of those in the “base.” A scam, in other words.

On the other hand, there is plenty about which to be angry in this country. What I want to do is reclaim the power of anger to focus us on social wrongs and induce us to take effective steps to right those wrongs. It’s okay to be angry – let’s just be angry at the right things.

GOVERNMENT

The canard these days is that government is the problem, not the solution. Like all slogans, it misses more than it hits, trading quickness off the tongue for a real explanatory power. Let’s tease this slogan apart.

First, the word “government.” Every human community has a government, that is, a set of rules and ways to enforce them that enable the humans in the community to get along with one another. In this sense, government is a solution to the problem presented by Adam and Eve. When Adam was in the garden by himself, he had no need for anything external to govern him. When Eve arrived, politics arrived with her: a positioning for power and control. They and the generations that followed them formed governments so they wouldn’t kill each other off.

There is no alternative to a government; there are only alternative governments.

Second, governments can operate in parallel. When an American politician spouts this slogan, he or she means that the “government” provided by the market (more on this term later) is better at achieving some set of values and outcomes than the infrastructure of offices and agencies and so on we usually associate with “government.” This is what politicians usually mean when they spout this slogan or one of its cousins about “limited government”: what we usually picture as the government (Congress, the state house, and so on) needs

to be limited so that some other form of government (in the United States, this usually means “the market”) can fill in.

Third: what is this “better” that can be achieved if our usual government is limited/diminished and the power of the parallel government (the market) is unleashed? The answer to this draws from a deep well of American mythology about the individual’s power to achieve great things through self-reliance and self-sufficiency: removing the shackles of regulation and taxation will ignite a new age of creativity and progress. Government can’t pick the winners, only the market can do that, and so (the argument goes), get the government out of the way. The new wealth created will trickle down to everyone, raising all boats.

This is a testable hypothesis, of course -- and how has “trickle down” tested out? By any measure, done by the right or the left, it has not worked: all boats have not been raised, and many have been sunk. In fact, the only time an epoch of raised boats occurred of the kind predicted by “trickle down” was during the post-World War II era (roughly 1946 to 1970), when unions were strong, government took a strong position on regulation, taxation was more progressive, and the wealth produced by the economy was more evenly distributed -- exactly the opposite of “trickle-down.”

Another good test of the hypothesis? The Great Recession of 2008. Take away the regulations (or don’t enforce them, which amounts to the same thing) and let the masters of the universe run the shop, and what happens? The world economy goes off the rails. The only thing that trickled down in 2008 was the disaster caused by overleveraged debt, a disaster citizens had to pay off with their taxes and their livelihoods.

The truth is, American citizens and American corporations have been living under limited government for quite some time. In fact, all government is limited: the monarchy of King Canute cannot stop the waves from rolling in. The problem is not “limitation” as a principle but the principles defining the limitation, and these principles have been, with few exceptions, driven by the interests of the monied classes. The sequester, cutbacks in public assistance and other austerity measures, regulatory capture of agencies by the people the agencies are supposed to regulate, government shut-downs, fortunes spent to buy political campaigns, and corporate and person tax code changes, to name a few, are all aimed at making more money/power available to some people and far less money/power available to others. This type of limited government has

been painful and dangerous to the majority of American citizens, a statement that can be easily confirmed with just a little digging in Google.

So, back to our original slogan: government is the problem, not the solution. The “problem,” as it’s been defined, is that government lays a dead hand on the creativity and inventiveness that could bring America back to its former greatness and that the “solution” is to pry off the dead hand (i.e., impose limited government) and free the caged bird of the market.

To really examine this idea in an American context, though, which is the only one that matters here, we need to apply the highfalutin principle to specific cases, since the individual lives of individual people the specific cases that matter most. And in what follows, when I use “government” or “democratic government,” I’m thinking usually of the federal government, but not always: sometimes I’ll use the word “government” in a general way, as that collection of people and institutions that does our governing. You’ll be able to recognize the focus.

Given this American emphasis, to me, the description of the relationship between “problem” and “solution” reverses our actual situation.

Our democratic government is supposed to serve the interests of all, but it does so by serving different interests in different ways in an attempt to ensure that people and communities at all points along the social/political/economic spectrums get what they need to survive and prosper. Our democratic government is the only organization we have that can do this since its mandate, given to it by those it governs (remember Lincoln: of, by, and for the people), is to impose limitations that will benefit the people as a whole (“the people” includes corporations but is not limited to corporations).

The market, on the other hand, has no such mandate and can never fulfill such a mandate because it functions best only when it helps a limited number of entities in limited ways to make a profit.

The “problem” with American government, to me, is that it under-reaches rather than over-reaches. Its overall charter is to ensure that citizens receive the goods and services they need to reduce the suffering and cruelty that life inevitably brings to people. It should also ensure that outside of providing these services that people are left alone to pursue their private projects and private identities. The law, as it always does, will patrol the boundary between the public and the private.

As for those people we call corporations, they know quite well, but do not want to admit, that they need limitations in order to prosper. Take the idea of the “free market.” The only thing that makes the free market “free” is government. Without the governing provided by the government, the market, left to its own devices, will lead, first, to the war of every man against every man (“competition” is the modern name for this) and then, second, to monopoly or monopsony or oligarchy as corporations combine to protect themselves. A market has no mechanism to say “no” to its imperative for endless growth and continuous circulation of capital, and the people in charge of running the market will do what they need to do to satisfy these imperatives.

How does the government make the market “free”? A few examples.

- The market needs the courts to enforce contracts (essentially, a system of enforced trust) so that exchange can take place.
- The market needs government to ensure that there is an actual market to which corporations can bring their goods and services (e.g., trade agreements and wars).
- The market needs government to pay for the externalities the market doesn't want to pay for, such as climate change and Superfund sites, since having to pay for these means higher prices and lower profits.

In exchange for these and many other services, the market is expected to provide the citizens with the wherewithal to conduct their lives. But to use “in exchange” here is really a lie because, of course, there is no contract, and no one on the market side is held accountable if the deal falls through. Yes, some people do use the phrase “social contract,” and some have constructed “social contract theory,” but this is only a metaphoric use of the word “contract” since there is no actual contract that one signs and which obligates the signer to the other signers of the contract.

And even where there is something that resembles an actual contract with the people (through their government), the market (in the shape of a corporation) is not obligated to fulfill it. For example, Community A gives Corporation A tax breaks and other goodies if Corporation A builds its plant in Community A and provides jobs. Corporation A takes the credits and goodies but ends up not doing what it said it was going to do and decides to move somewhere else because it can get a better deal. Any penalty for renegeing on the agreement with Community A? None.

It will be more helpful, I think, as we examine the anger against government, to stop thinking of the “free market” as government’s dancing partner, the two of them together balancing out the social order in a grand public/private enterprise. It is not an equal partnership, nor should there ever be such a partnership. I’ll talk more about that in a moment, but for now, I think it is best to see the market (by which, I mean, of course, all the people and systems dedicated to the circulation of capital and the making of profit) as a self-involved system that will partner as readily with devils as with angels to reach its one and only goal: its own success on its own terms.

Another way to say this: The market’s only guiding light is to find enough consumers to buy its output and generate a sufficient rate of profit for investors. What some might describe as social goods – well-paying jobs and careers, stable communities – it sees simply as a means to breed profit, and it will, without remorse, destroy these in order to get what it needs: An American company making money off Chinese consumers needn’t really care about American workers if its widgets are being made in Vietnam. Anyone buying them anywhere is all that investors want to see.

Okay, if I don’t see the government and the market as an equal partnership, then what is it? Henri Martin, a French circus performer, entered a lion’s cage in 1819 and emerged without a scratch, becoming the modern founder of lion-taming. Henri Martin’s relationship with his tiger is the relationship our government needs to have with the market. It needs to recognize the market for the useful but dangerous organization that it is and act in accord with that knowledge. American government needs to respect the market’s power but not let that respect undermine its capacity to provide a counter-power based on its obligations to the people who have authorized it to act on their behalf for their welfare.

In addition, because of this obligation it has to the people it serves, American government must act in this to-and-fro with the market as the stronger actor, the one who tames, not the one who is tamed. The purpose of the government is to protect its citizens from the predatory nature of the market.

(An aside: to use the word “predatory” is not to make a moral judgement. Lions are not evil, just efficient hunters and scavengers. I am saying the same about the market.)

I think American government under-reaches because its players have chosen to waive their protective obligations and instead, for reasons ranging from true

faith to cynical game-playing, have accepted the following notion: American political and economic culture works best when based on the premise that everything should be arranged so that corporations can maximize shareholder value and return on investment. This belief that the market is the lion tamer rather than the beast to be tamed is the real reason behind the economic inequalities of our second Gilded Age, the abject ranking of the United States in all indices of social welfare (e.g., infant mortality, child poverty, and so on), the anemic political participation of American citizens (why play a rigged game?), and the squandering of blood and treasure on imperial ventures.

Many of us may want to believe that the Wizard of Oz is the real deal and that there is no man behind the curtain we need to reprimand and shame, but this belief has bloody outcomes. Government under-reach, in literal and figurative ways, has sacrificial consequences, from soldiers slaughtered in foreign countries in ill-thought crusades to workers killed on their jobs because a hatred of “regulations” prevents OSHA from hiring enough inspectors to enforce workplace safety.

I could go on piling example upon example of how government under-reach – that is, letting the tiger determine the rules of engagement with the lion tamer – has damaged the country, but that’s another essay for another time. Instead, I want to circle back to where we started as a way to explain where I think people need to place their anger. Here is where I place my anger.

- I am angry at government under-reach because it cedes the playing field to the lion.
- I want government to stop being the market’s hand-maiden and start being my advocate.
- To be my advocate, to be able to say “no” to the lion, the government must uncorrupt itself – public funding of campaigns, no “revolving door” between industry and government, and so on. In other words, the government must be a wholly owned subsidiary of the citizens, and the citizens must become its activist board of directors.
- The government should treat the market as one of many petitioners, not as the sole petitioner, and the market should not always get to be first in line.
- Government stewardship of the market will benefit everyone. Plenty of examples abound (the social democracies in Europe and Scandinavia, our own country during the Depression and for the two decades after World

War II) where rules changing how the wealth produced by the market gets distributed have done just that without impairing, and in most instances strengthening, how the market does its job.

- Last, but certainly not least, I place my anger on myself for not being politically active enough. None of what I want my government to do will happen until I commit myself to making it happen. In its own way, my government is a tiger that needs to be tamed, and the only way the taming will happen is if I, in league with my fellow citizens, band together to give the government direction and command.

I know, I know, I've missed a great deal in this short excursion. My defense is that I'm writing, in essence, a pamphlet, not a book, a call to action rather than a tome. Moreover, this topic will generate far more voltage if we discuss it together wherever we gather— dinner tables, saloons, parks, online, and so on. So, gather and talk, and let me know what you come up with.

So, to recap. The premise that government is the problem and that the market is the solution, hides the fact that protecting the market seems to have become government's primary job. Anger should be directed at government under-reach, with a call for government to be the citizens' advocate and to tame the market so that the wealth it generates benefits everyone and not just a narrow range of clients.

IMMIGRATION

Here's my immigration policy:

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
 With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
 Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
 A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
 Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
 Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
 Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
 The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
 "Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
 With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
 Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
 The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
 Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
 I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Now, I know that the “The New Colossus,” by Emma Lazarus, inscribed on a plaque at the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, is not really a policy, in the sense of regulations with a rubric for evaluation and so on. But it does voice, for me, the attitude with which we should deal with those who want to come and live here: we welcome you, we are glad you have made it to this country, a country forged by immigrants.

(Please note: when I speak of “immigration” here, I am usually referring to people coming into the United States from Central America.)

Does this mean we simply open the doors and have no procedures for evaluating and processing immigrants? No. As long as nations saddle themselves with the antiquated institution of borders, then the governments of these nations have to have ways to record who lives within them. My focus is the spirit in which we do the processing and the picture we have in our heads about “the immigrant”: I propose Emma Lazarus, the opposite of mean-spiritedness and the assumption that immigrants are criminals, terrorists, or moochers.

Thinking about what to do in regards to immigration also requires us to think about what the terms “citizenship” and “citizen” means. Being born a citizen of the United States is, above all else, the result of historical chance, of being in a certain place at a certain time, a fact that should make natural-born American citizens feel a bit humble and not at all righteous: thanks to accident and through no effort on our part, we are here rather than someplace else.

Let’s look at some of the “anti-Emma Lazarus” reactions in circulation these days.

Immigrants broke the law, and law-breaking should not be rewarded.

Ignoring that our society does sometimes reward law-breaking (e.g., the financial bailouts that happened in 2008), the statement is reasonable in some abstract sense but not reasonable as a policy.

We have laws against burglary. By breaking into your home and stealing whatever I steal - in other words, by breaking the law - I have damaged you in some degree, and that damage triggers punishment for me (if I’m caught).

But the law broken by immigrants is not the same kind of law. The law governing the movement of immigrants is made up of administrative steps: You get to come in if you do this and then this and then this and then this, and if

you don't come in to the country in these ways, then you've broken the law. But unlike with the burglary law, there is no damage done to anyone here that is equivalent to having something stolen out of a home or business. One could, I suppose, find a damage of some sort (and immigration opponents do spend energy noting what they believe are economic, social, and cultural damages), but in the end, the two kinds of damage don't line up.

In other words, breaking a law is not always the kind of law-breaking that requires punishment. This does not mean that everyone who makes it to American soil gets the Cuban exception (a foot on the dry sand of Miami equals sanctuary). But it does mean that we can process them with what I'm calling the "Emma Lazarus attitude": welcoming rather than restrictive, considered an asset rather than a liability.

Of course, none of this happens in a vacuum. If the United States faces, as it does, an influx of immigrants from Central America, then it should work with those countries to figure out why so many want to leave and what can we do to make it worth their citizens' while to stay within their own countries. (Not enacting "trade deals" like NAFTA would be one helpful action on our part. Not supporting illegitimate regimes, such as the one in Honduras, would be another.)

So, yes, they've broken the law. But that really should be our starting point, not the conclusion, of our relationship with the immigrants, since not all law-breaking is a criminal activity. And regarding the oft-cited 11 million undocumented people living and working the United States today - these millions of law-breakers? I'd grant them citizenship today. They've earned it.

We need to secure our borders.

What does the verb "secure" mean here? To some, it means a literal wall along the United States/Mexico border (and, astonishing to me at least, 40% of Americans would build a border wall with Canada, something Scott Walker mentioned in his short-lived bid for the presidency). "Secure" means a fortress, a brick-and-mortar version of Reagan's Star Wars defensive shield deflecting every incoming immigrant assault.

As more than one wag has said, a 12-foot wall will always inspire a 13-foot ladder. (And Reagan's plan turned out to be more of a sieve than a shield.) Theoretically, I suppose, we could build such a thing (borrowing from medieval

castle defenses, such as curtain walls, moats, barbicans, and portcullises) and “staff” it with a combination of human guards and electronic sensors.

But the history of such defenses securing their sites against sieges is not inspiring (think of the Maginot Line in France against Hitler’s blitzkrieg), and mostly likely we’d find that whatever we built would never provide enough security (after all, it only takes one person getting through to invalidate the whole enterprise).

At a deeper level, though, many of those calling for “securing” our borders really mean securing them against criminals and terrorists - this is what keeps them up at night. And so the question has to be, Is it possible to secure a border against the entry of criminals and terrorists (“border” here loosely defined as entry points into the country, wherever they may be)? The obvious answer is “no.” No matter how much technology and software and people gets thrown at the challenge, there can never be a 100% success rate.

Another truth of the matter is that fifteen years of the most heightened surveillance regime in the history of the United States has failed to cement the borders, proven by the number of times law enforcement agencies talk about the plots that have been foiled on the homeland’s soil. (Whether these plots have been real or the result of entrapments is another discussion.) Clearly, the “bad guys” still get through, and, more importantly, no amount of border-securing can stop the flow of information and ideas. (Cyber-borders are just as leaky as geographical borders.)

But I suspect that in their heart of hearts those who want secure borders know that they can’t have them and that the call for them as a pre-condition to any other discussion about immigration (“Let’s secure our borders first”) is simply a way to avoid having any other discussion about immigration. If we can’t achieve item #1, there’s no reason to move on to item #2.

Is there such a thing as secure borders? Not if we mean physically or administratively impervious: the 13-foot ladder will always trump the 12-foot wall. The security of our borders lies in something many Americans are reluctant to admit they need: the coöperation of others, the give-and-take of diplomacy, the sharing of decisions, all of which is a good thing. It also rests in the darker practices of the surveillance state and in the tension within a democratic society about the proper balance between security and liberty.

In short, security is a process, not a finished state of being, and a secure border is not a geographical location but the fluctuating result of a fluctuating negotiation. “Securing the border” should be dropped as a pre-condition to any debate about immigration.

Immigrants are a drain on the economy and on social services

Economists differ, of course, on their answers to this assertion, but it is pretty clear, regardless of which numbers one chooses to accept, that the American economy would be screwed, to put it mildly, without the participation of the millions of immigrant workers in this country. Sergio Arau's 2004 movie, *A Day Without A Mexican*, makes this point with humor and compassion. Like it or not, the American economy depends upon the work being done (and the taxes being paid) by a large cadre of law-breakers.

As for the social services being “used” by the immigrants - it's not as if the United States offers an overly generous level of public assistance to anyone (unless one is a corporation receiving subsidies and tax relief), and so the resources being expended are more than offset by the wealth their labor generates.

Immigrants don't assimilate into American culture, refusing to learning to English.

This is a generational issue, very common among every group that has ever come to the United States: the first generation tends to hold on to what they left, but the generations that follow assimilate into the culture and add their flavors to the cultural stew that has always been the United States.

It is true that in certain parts of the country, Spanish exists as working second language. Where I live, in Weehawken, NJ, Bergenline Avenue runs from Union City to North Bergen and is almost entirely populated by people from every Spanish-speaking country. I can use my English if I need to do any shopping there, but it doesn't hurt to also use my small store of Spanish as well. The same goes for what I would call the “lower levels” in New York City: restaurant wait staff, bike delivery people, construction workers, counter help. Spanish flows through these levels, and it functions as a parallel language system. Knowing a little of the language helps a lot.

A situation like this drives many people of my parents' generation crazy. It wouldn't do any good to explain the history of language variations in the United States nor point out that the United States doesn't have an official language and that countries that try to enforce a dominant language only succeed in fragmenting rather than unifying people. To them, being American is signified by speaking English only and by shedding one's non-American culture.

But my parents' generation will pass, and other generations that live with Spanish in their ears will come to accept it (and have already accepted it) as part of the American soundscape, understanding that assimilation always flows both ways, immigrants into American culture and American culture into the immigrants. This process has happened for every group of people who have come to the United States, which is why American culture should be seen more as a blender mixing up everything thrown it into rather as a uniform that one wears.



Here is where the anger about immigrants and immigration needs to be directed:

- Let's not forget and forego our history as a nation of immigrants (including, if one wants to go back far enough, indigenous people). This reminder has become corny and kitschy because it is used insincerely at Fourth of July celebrations and the like, but its truth is still powerful: we've reached whatever heights we've reached as a nation because millions of people believed in the promise of individual freedom and social/economic progress that we broadcast. Immigration is something that has endowed us with greatness as a nation.
- "Immigrants" are not the cause of our social problems, and barring them from living full lives in this country will not end our social problems. The source for those problems lies elsewhere. If anything, immigration provides possible solutions to these problems in the same way that increased biodiversity in an environment improves humans' chances for finding fixes to the problems that humans have caused themselves.
- Based on pure self-interest, "natives" should welcome armies of new workers, who will ensure that the Social Security system which will funds, in part, their ability to live post-career independent lives will continue to prosper.

- Immigration will not increase terrorism, and restricting immigration will not stop terrorism. People who want to commit terrorist acts in the United States will always find ways to do that, and they will do it through legal means. Rather than blame immigration, the United States should re-examine the actions it has taken over the past two decades that have spawned the terrorism we fear. We are hated for distinct and legitimate reasons, and to a great extent the terrorism we war against is a self-inflicted wound.

Open borders does not mean unregulated borders, but the regulation should work to our advantage in the broadest sense of “advantage”: new people means new ideas, new practices, new risks taken and new triumphs achieved. If the citizens of the United States really do want to live in a country that is progressive, democratic, dynamic, innovative, and exemplary of what an ethic of individual liberty and social responsibility can accomplish, then the United States needs to renew its belief in Emma Lazarus’ call to the world and welcome those who choose to answer it.

GUNS

What is it about guns and the Second Amendment that gets people hot and bothered in a way that the butchery caused by the guns does not?

Often, the language about guns becomes downright religious, sacralizing guns and guns owners/ownership, asserting that gun users have rights that non-gun users are bound to respect and that the solution to “guns” in our society will come about when non-gun users begin respecting these rights and gun users act as stewards of the public peace by promoting what I can only call the “safe sex” version of gun usage.

This argument is absurd, of course, both as argument and as public policy. So, let’s take it apart to see where our anger should be placed.

First and foremost are these “rights” – what are they? The Supreme Court did say that gun ownership was a right, but it didn’t say that unregulated gun ownership was a right. After all, the phrases “well-regulated” and “bear arms” appear in the same sentence, so the writers must have meant for them to have something to do with one another.

So the resistance by gun users in the name of Constitutional liberty to measures that mean to regulate them – or, more accurately, regulate things like

buying/selling and information (through things like licenses, registration, etc.) – is hypocritical because they aren't really interested in protecting the Second Amendment but what I call Second Amendment Lite: all “bear arms,” no “well-regulated.”

This also means, as a logical consequence of their hypocrisy, that they must consider the 30,000 gun-related homicides a year a necessary blood sacrifice that the rest of must pay to protect their rights – why else would they do nothing to stop them?

Are these the kind of rights, and rights-holders, that any of us should be bound to respect, where gun-user self-interest (not to mention their fetishism about the gun-object itself) is tarted up as public interest and where someone else's pain is considered a proper homage to their beliefs? Not for me, and not for any state that would consider itself well-regulated and in service to the welfare of its citizens.

So, if these “rights” are not to be respected, what about the object to which they are attached? What, actually, is a gun?

Despite whatever else a gun is considered – beautiful machine, symbol of liberty – it is foremost a manufactured commodity that, like cigarettes, if used properly will only cause injury. Therefore, it makes no sense to treat something so dangerous with veneration when we should be treating it as we would treat any commodity that might cause harm, through the processes we have for product safety regulation. My toaster has to undergo such a vetting; why not something geometrically more dangerous than that?

In addition to product safety regulation, we should also treat guns as a public health problem, just as we did with cigarettes. The injuries and deaths caused by people using easily acquired guns have to be paid for, and there's no defensible argument against why that cost should not be borne, in part, by the companies that make the product that helps cause the injury, just as we did with cigarettes.

Therefore, the “rights” of gun users (and that includes the companies that make the guns) should not trump legitimate concerns about product safety and public health. That they do only proves the power of money and fear to stifle reason and action – and that's all it proves. Sacrosanct rights, individual liberty, the tyranny of government (more on this in a moment) – all a smoke-screen to hide the fact that gun users simply don't want to be told what to do with

their manufactured commodities and that they believe their own self-interests in this regard are of a higher order than the interests of individual victims and the commonwealth at large.

Well, what about that tyranny of the government? What about the argument that the state wants to seize the guns of individuals and take away people's freedoms and that the guns are necessary to resist such despotism, in the finest American revolutionary tradition?

Really?

If the state really wanted to take away people's guns, it would take away people's guns. As the owner of the biggest gun on the block, so to speak, the state can pretty much do what it wants to do when it comes to expending violence against the citizens. Sure, there would be hold-outs and pockets of resistance, but the state would win, at least for a time, in part because, even though there are 200 or 300 million guns in the people's hands, these gun users in no way resemble a "well-regulated militia." The thought that there would be coordinated push-back by citizens enraged by this assault on their rights is a fever dream.

But the state is not interested in taking away people's guns as a means of controlling them because it doesn't need to do that to control them. There are far easier and more effective ways to cow a citizenry than outright attack, and the state uses all of them right now, from oppressive surveillance to a friendly tax audit.

So, if gun-user rights are really expressions of self-interest underscored by an adolescent whininess about being told what to do; if guns, as products, are dangerous when used as instructed; if the idea that people have to have guns in order to resist tyranny is just a fever dream, what defense is left to justify not changing the situation concerning guns and gun violence in our society?

None.

Gun users, though, are right about one thing: it's probable that gun regulation will not stem the tide of gun violence, at least not in any meaningful way. Gun regulation is about gun regulation, but guns are not the source of the violence – that lies elsewhere in our society. The only way to turn that tide of violence is by basing our society on peace and justice instead of its customary foundations in hyper-individualism, capitalist greed, and willful ignorance (about history, about economics, about morality).

Now, if gun users wanted to work towards that end, I might be more open to respecting the rights they say I should respect about their guns. But until they come around, then I have no recourse but to work towards making sure they and their manufactured commodities get at least the level of regulation that car owners, barbers, and dry cleaners have to undergo to do their business. Anything less than that (and I'd like a lot more) is just an insult to the people sacrificed to ensure that they get to play with their toys without interruption.

TRUMP AND THE CLASS WAR

Hopefully, history will soon eliminate Donald from our political vista, but in the meantime he is busy sucking the oxygen out of the room.

Donald supporters are all about anger, and it's an old anger in American politics: white resentment at social and economic changes going on in the country. It's the same well from which Reagan, Nixon, Wallace, Goldwater, and others drew; it's the same stew described by Thomas Frank back in his 2004 book *What's The Matter With Kansas?*

The anger he evokes is real, in that people are feeling anger rather than feigning, and it needs to be dealt with. However, his followers are directing it at the wrong targets (in this case, "Muslims" and other "others"). The politicians who declare they want to serve them are the leading edge of an institutional effort three decades in the making of establishing a conservative ideology as the default intellectual framework for political action. One of the results of this effort is that anger over culture-war issues (abortion, gay marriage) co-opts anger over the economic conditions that have hollowed out the lives of many of those who support Donald. The result, as Frank pointed out, is that those who have lost the most in the economic changes that have taken place since the 1970s end up voting against their own economic interests, distracted by moral/social issues that, in the long run, turn out to be irrelevant. (After all, has marriage equality ended Western Christian civilization?)

If I were any of the people running for the presidency, I would not waste my time excoriating Donald for what he brings out in people - that's just a mug's game. Instead, I would thank him and then co-opt the anger and point it in the right directions: at the 1%, Wall Street, the disenfranchisement of millions of people, a corrupt political establishment - in short, at those things that have pillaged their lives and made them feel (and in many cases, become) superfluous.

But attending to this anger can't stop at "I feel your pain"; this anger is perfect organizing energy for a movement to counter-balance the weight of the money, cynicism, and venality on the other end of the balance beam. They just need to see the class war that has been waged against them and gird themselves to fight back.

Yes, I said the dread phrase: class war. That a class war is going on, though, is not a secret, and naming it out loud is not bad manners. No less a capitalist icon than Warren Buffett spilled the beans on CNN in 2011: "Actually, there's been class warfare going on for the last 20 years, and my class has won. We're the ones that have gotten our tax rates reduced dramatically."

Now, we can dither about what Karl Marx meant when he spoke about class and class warfare and whether American society has classes and, if so, how they would get defined. But we all know, in some generalized way, that Buffett is right, and that the economic interests of the many (what Occupy Wall Street called "the 99%" - not accurate but still a useful rallying cry) have been trashed by a system rigged to reward the financiers, bankers, and speculators, the "casino economy," as Bennett Harrison and others have named it. In a casino, the house always wins because there are a lot of losers to fund the winnings.

Donald's people know this (as do many others); what they don't know, because it's been purged from our teaching of American history, is how people in the past have fought against situations like this. Steve Fraser, in his *Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*, published in 2015, gives a superb history of this struggle during our first Gilded Age. Why do we not have this same resistance to our second Gilded Age? Fraser has his thoughts about this, as does David Bosworth in his *The Demise of Virtue in Virtual America: The Moral Origins of the Great Recession*. Opinions will differ about why there is so little resistance, but it's a solid fact that what resistance there is pales in comparison to what happened at the end of the 19th century.

This resistance, though, has to be communal and collaborative, not fueled by the American ethic of individualism, which is all about isolation and a fever dream of what an unregulated individual human being can accomplish if left to his own devices. It needs to be "socialist" because there is no capitalist version of this resistance, and in learning about the socialism they need, many Americans can regain a heritage that gave citizens in the past hope and energy, vision and stamina. (Even getting to the mild democratic socialism of Bernie

Sanders would be a triumph, though the eventual goal of the class war has to be the conversion of capitalism into a more humane system.)

So, thank you, Donald, for raising the anger, but now get out of the way. Enlistment for the class war is now open, and you are now the target, as you always should have been.

Addendum, Post November 8: What Is It That They Think They're Rebelling Against?

I've been reading through post-election musings about why Trump voters voted for Trump (like Chris Bodenner's profile of a Trump voter in the *Atlantic*, "I Voted for the Middle Finger, for the Wrecking Ball," or "Revenge of the Forgotten Class" on *Pro Publica*), and much of it focuses on how a rank of forgotten Americans (often abbreviated as "white, male, working class") banded together to topple the Washington élites in service to a mission: bringing back an America that existed for about a decade after the end of World War II, an America that was male- and white-ascendant and industrial, dominant in the global marketplace and militarily superior – the "exceptional America" when people refer to American exceptionalism.

What I've taken away from my reading is that these "explanations," as earnest as they are, can't explain the motivations of the Trump voter because those motivations seem to be a yarn-tangle of real facts and faux facts, intestinal feelings, peeves verging into angers, confusions and misdirections, and deep visceral worries (justified or not). The writers clearly believe that if "we" (meaning those outside this cohort) can understand their aggrievements, then "we" can craft solutions for their vexations. If their vexations can be soothed, America will have taken a big step toward getting back on the right path.

But two things are clear from these analyses. First, there are no solutions to their vexations, or at least most of them. The middle-class-making industrial jobs of the 1950s are gone forever and will not be coming back. The country will not be majority white for much longer, and the United States, the nation of immigrants, will continue to be a nation of immigrants. Gender will continue becoming more fluid, abortions will still be performed, black and brown people will not stop protesting against racism, income inequality will make class mobility even more impossible than it is today, and millions of workers may simple become superfluous in the future economy.

Both political parties have no clue about how to craft a policy response to the changing world in which they find themselves. Or, to be more accurate, there are plenty of solutions on the shelf to address the tectonic shifts taking place, but neither political party's structure is designed to incorporate these ideas and champion them as policy, and neither party is prepared to lead the effort of re-designing American society to meet the historical changes it faces.

Second, Trump's rise should not have been a surprise because we've seen this story before, the "story" being the way American citizens have been bamboozled into voting against their own economic and social interests. Thomas Frank documented it well in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and *The Wrecking Crew*, but he's far from the only writer who has picked apart how the Republican Party has used culture wars, voter suppression, nostalgia, gerrymandering, and pure obstinance to maintain its power.

The conservative agenda that the Trump voters will get from Trump will not be the one for which they voted, if only because Trump can't do much of what he said he would do (deport 11 million people, build a wall for which Mexico will pay, repeal trade deals and impose tariffs, take away health insurance from millions of people) and because of the internal bickering within his own party: it is not settled as to what constitutes "genuine" conservatism, and governance will grind to a halt as the fiscal hawks, culture warriors and moderates (yes, they do exist in the party) battle this out.

But if a consolidated conservative agenda does emerge, it will not be premised on curing the ills that the Trump voters believe afflict them. It will be premised on elimination, abandonment, and punishment.

Think about what that conservative agenda will include, based on what its advocates have said:

- public assistance at all levels is swapped out for block grants and vouchers (or even just eliminated)
- public insurance (Social Security et. al.) is handed over to the tender mercies of the financial markets
- paying for health care becomes a purely personal matter (HSAs, Medicare/Medicaid privatized/voucherized or eliminated)
- military power is extended and the "war on terror" made endless
- the tax code is reduced to a flat tax

- infrastructure reform is either delayed or privatized (e.g., toll roads built by Bechtel, Chicago's 75-year lease of its parking meter revenues to Morgan Stanley)
- protective regulations are repealed (EPA, consumer protection)
- net neutrality is overturned
- Dodd-Frank is rescinded
- deportations go back up to Obama levels and higher
- the media are neutralized (libel laws, continued economic decline of the industry)
- public (or collective) space is reduced toward zero
- the courts become places where most people will not have their day (public defenders defunded, arbitration agreements imposed in contracts, and so on)
- corporations will be accorded even more people-like rights
- I'm exhausted, and there's still so much more!!

The Trump voters bought themselves a pig in a poke, just as the silent majority bought one with Nixon and the “morning in America”-hoppers bought one with Reagan and the evangelicals bought one with Bush II. They will soon find out the value of what they have purchased – the 2018 elections will tell that tale.

Enough.

I hope this breast-beating about the white working class stops soon because it is an analytical dead-end in the light of the emancipatory politics America needs.

This is the speech I wish Hillary had given after her gaffe(?) in September about Trump voters and “deplorables.” What she should have said to the white working class is this:

I'm sorry I called some of you deplorables – things can get out of hand during a hard-fought election like this, and I shouldn't have said it. Here is what I should have said: It's the system that's deplorable. I'll go one step further: it's deplorable for a lot of people, not just you. It's deplorable for a lot of people who you think you don't have a connection to but you do: poor single working mothers, immigrants workers paying taxes but having to hide in the shadows, people who somehow don't fit into the definition

of “normal” but who are good, decent people nonetheless. If you want to make America great, then you should link up with these people so that everyone who is getting screwed by this system can work arm-in-arm to turn the deplorable situation into a situation where ordinary people can be on the winning side.

I'm not crazy for saying this. It's part of your own history. One hundred and twenty years ago, people like you banded together to change the system. Urban workers, rural farmers, women, black people, immigrants – they formed the People's Party, also known as the Populist Party, and it shook things up. The labor movement that many Republicans so hate fought and died for things like you not having to work seven days a week and being killed on the job. The civil rights movement fought for justice, not just for black people but for poor people – and that includes you. And so much more history I could tell that would show you that when ordinary people work together and don't believe the élites scaremongering them about race and migration and religion and “the death of Western civilization,” they can accomplish great things.

And I have to be honest with you, and you know what I'm saying is true, even if you're shouting something else: we can't get the great days of post-World War II America back again. The factories aren't coming back. Coal mining isn't coming back again. Climate change is not going to stop. Black people and gay people and women are not going to give up the gains they've made, at a cost of life and limb. America is not going to be sole leader of the world again. Change is going to continue, and it's going to be strange and confusing because change is always going to be strange and confusing. We live in troubled times, but we have to be adult enough to accept that and smart enough to apply the collective intelligence we have as Americans to make sure the changes bring prosperity and safety to everyone.

I can understand your pain. But yours isn't the only pain. You want people to listen to you? You should be listened to. But you have to listen to the other people as well. It has to go both ways. Like Benjamin Franklin said when facing the might of the British empire: “We must, indeed, all hang together or, most assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”

I prefer that we all hang together and share with each other what Abraham Lincoln called “the better angels of our nature.”

The War on Christmas

Jon Stewart, when he was the host of *The Daily Show*, annually brought up in December the “war on Christmas” reporting done by Fox News and others.

But Stewart was wrong: there is a war on Christmas, though it is not waged by liberals but by capitalists.

Let me quote, in full, an article by Steven Thrasher of the Guardian written in December 2015. (I have not gotten permission to use this.) He says what I would say, only better (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/11/conservatives-should-blame-capitalism-war-on-christmas>)

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The “war on Christmas” has become an annual yuletide fiction as reliable as tales of the Grinch, the nutcracker or even of Santa Claus himself. Fox News and its ilk complain about this alleged attack on Christianity each year. Make no mistake, though. There definitely is a war on Christmas, but it is not homosexual leftists like myself who are waging it: it is capitalism.

As my brother James and I often discuss every holiday season, Christians stole an ancient winter pagan holiday and rebranded it as Jesus’s birthday. Similarly, hyper-consumerist, labor-destroying, income-inequality-creating and ecologically destructive capitalism has now stolen Christmas from the church.

It is the rightwing which has cast baby Jesus from American Christmas, like a would-be Syrian refugee orphan. Jesus ain’t the reason for the season because of liberals as such, but because of market forces in late-stage capitalism, which are gleefully celebrated by Republicans, no matter how alienating to souls.

The first battles of this war on Christmas are usually fought right after (and increasingly on) Thanksgiving Day, as Black Friday shoppers are whipped into a frenzy of buying garbage products we don’t need, built in ways that maim and kill the people who make them and produced by means that slowly kill us all.

Workers are pulled from their families’ Thanksgiving tables for these spectacles of sales, which can turn deadly. The average American will spend hundreds of dollars on such Christmas consumerism, often on high-interest credit cards, which leads to more debt, shame and isolation.

The war on Christmas is waged by foisting traditions upon us so repetitive and mechanized that we resent them for alienating us from ourselves and one another.

Take Christmas music: hearing it is like being a goose force-fed before having its liver turned into foie gras. There is nothing joyous about being made

to listen to Christmas music in every public space you inhabit against your will, even if you happen to be Christian.

For single people like me, Christmas tunes induce sadness, from missing dead family members to feeling like a loser for not having a partner or kids. For families, it induces the desire to buy more (if you can) and shame (if you can't). The point of this incessant music, like a military march or a church hymn, is to instill a sense of discipline to a higher power: the market.

This war on Christmas is being waged this election year by Republican politicians who are perverting the most basic takeaways of the story of Christ's birth. The Christmas story is about a very pregnant mother finding no room at the inn and needing to give birth in a barn. It is quite at odds with Republicans who want to end children's health insurance and who think orphans under the age of three should be left to die in war-torn countries. And, when Donald Trump and a frightening chunk of Republicans reveal a desire to ban Muslims from our nation, they are violating the many scriptural calls in the old and new testaments to welcome the stranger.

This war on Christmas was waged when the San Bernadino holiday party shooting prompted a spike in guns sales. This is a slap in the face to Jesus and his mandate: "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."

It's odd, given how black Christian people are told we must must immediately forgive any and all violence towards us, that Republicans would celebrate a Nevada assemblywoman who sent out a Christmas card in which every adult member of her family is toting a gun. As the Intercept put it: "Gun industry executives say mass shootings are good for business." The church of capitalism demands more gun sales, and so Jesus's call to cheek turning must be damned.

Police brutality is pretty effective at snuffing out the Christmas spirit, too. Consider the iconic moment of police threatening protesters beneath a season's greetings sign in Ferguson last year. We Americans have gone from one hellish Christmas to the next, and brave protesters have been occupying malls and interrupting shoppers' business as usual. Yet we've still seen more than 1,000 police killings since the last time our "Christian nation" gathered around to recall how the angel brought God's message with the birth of a child: "on earth peace, goodwill toward men".

Many conservatives might think the only problem in that image from Ferguson is that the banner said “season’s greetings” and not “Merry Christmas” And so they let Jesus be co-opted by the same violent, racist and alienating capitalism which has co-opted our entire world. This war against Christmas is waged right before their very eyes – but they just don’t see it.

Ω