

*Just*

Volume I  
10/29/01–10/21/02

# Thinking



**Justin Katz**

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**Volume I**  
**10/29/01–10/21/02**

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Just Thinking is a weekly column written by Justin Katz and published to the Timshel Arts Web site every Monday. The columns vary widely in content, from quotidian to abstract, and in genre, from essays to poetry.

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## Who Are These People?

10/29/01

Now that the dust of modern life, which was kicked up by the tumultuous emotions following September 11, has begun to settle in my mind, some exposed questions continue to stick out conspicuously, dominated by “Who are these people?” and “How did they get where they are?” They are the questions of a nation that has seen the incongruities of its culture laid bare by the shattering of the distorted glass through which it has observed itself.

Who are these politicians who run away at the first sign of a minor biological threat while urging us to go on with our lives? If they represent us, why do they seem always on the verge of contradicting the wishes of the American people in order to take the easy road in this treacherous — but absolutely crucial — international battle of wills that we now face? If they are to be for the people of the United States of America, how is it that they can propose measures that will hugely infringe on our civil rights but that barely offer an iota of additional protection?

Who are these actors who take the opportunity of a podium in front of the people who have most vividly seen the destruction of the attack to make a naïve plea for an obviously impossible peace? Who are these movie directors who compare Osama bin Laden to Einstein and are barely able to hold back their glee at the death of thousands of movie goers? The dead will never see “Born on the Fourth of July II.”

Who are these college professors who allow, perhaps encourage, patriotic students and supporting staff to be silenced

so as not to offend foreign students? Who are they then to turn around and cry censorship and McCarthyism when their own ridiculous and infantile views are so much as criticized? Moreover, why do our educators and researchers urge policy decisions to be based on questionably performed “academic” studies and lala-land abstract theories rather than on evidence from the real world... our world?

Who are these millionaire preachers who lie that they have been invited to negotiate with the enemy? Who are these novelists who, for all their claims of portraying the underlying truth in life, cannot find a distinction between as unambiguous a manifestation of evil as we are likely to ever see and a humanly flawed, but well-intentioned American population? Who are these columnists who selectively cite only convenient facts and twist and rewrite history — using the footnotes of the professors — to find some way to blame America? And they do not blame those in the nation who profit most by its opportunities — many of the people listed here — but the broader group of you and me, whom they believe to be so uncouth and uncivilized that we need constant chastising to behave ourselves.

Who are these network-news executives who go out of their way to present sympathetic pictures of wounded Afghans and announce U.S. military missteps while not walking a few New York City blocks to photograph a victim of the attacks with burn wounds still not yet healed and a World Trade Center still smoldering? How could they, men and women who are trained in the art of rhetoric and implications, allow their stations’ coverage of our just and righteous war to be called “America Strikes Back,” as if Colin Powell were Darth Vader and President Bush were the Emperor?

Lastly, who are the rest of us, the regular, real, and sane people of America, who have not confiscated the podiums of these bizarre caricatures? If anything valuable has emerged from the aftermath of September 11, it is the stark portrayal of the delusions and out-of-touch beliefs of the elite people to whom we have granted fairy-tale lives by voting for them, going to their

movies, sending our children to their colleges, buying their books and their papers, and watching their television shows.

I, for one, want it all to change. I'm not exactly sure how an entirely new class of sympathetic, intelligent, honest, forthright, and representative celebrities — with integrity — can replace the current symposium of snakes, but it must begin with the desire for change. Once the choice to change is made, perhaps a sufficient next step would be to inconvenience ourselves just slightly to better understand who it is that benefits from our consent and our dollars and redirect that consent and those dollars where they might reward the qualities that our most visible citizens should project.

Beyond concrete acts and statements, we can take the hot air out of the balloons of our elite buffoons by returning to the practice of participating in our own lives and enjoying each other's company more than that of two-dimensional moving mannequins on the television and looking to thought and activity for entertainment rather than patronizing the buffoons' silly puppet shows.

## Devil in the Details

11/05/01

A common belief among those inclined to express their views through the media has been that the terrorist attacks jarred Americans awake in some way. On a secular level, many older talk-radio callers have projected the opinion that my generation is waking up from the fantasy of prosperity and peace in which we've lived our entire lives. Regarding politics, I've heard of many ideological conversions by people whose faith in the left wing was brushed aside by Giuliani's strength and Bush's resolve.

Regarding faith in its more traditional sense, I have found the immediacy of recent world crises to require continual restatements of my belief in a larger reality. I have retained, though it is increasingly compliant to my will, the reactive skeptical flinch of the Orthodox Intellectual, and I can still grasp the attitude of my prior doctrine. Through an objective view of the theological implications of September 11, I can understand how, among questioners and unbelievers, that agnostic/atheist axiom that an omnipotent, loving God could not allow suffering might carry even more weight now. On the other hand, it must be admitted that human perspective is inherently limited and that good comes of even terrible disruption. Between these two positions lies the fact that faith is subjective at its very core. To reconcile objective inquiry with the thoughts and emotions of our humanity, we must realize that it is only by one of the dangerous masterstrokes of atheistic proselytization that subjectivity is seen as anathema to truth.

In learning any subject, we sometimes forget the reasons for the decisions that we've made and cannot immediately explain our choices. I have also noted in myself an inclination, while nurturing my faith, to not look back upon my assumptions for fear of undermining them by discovering contradiction or self-delusion. However, for real faith — or progress in any intellectual or emotional pursuit — we cannot be afraid to constantly confirm the strength of each branch before we reach for the next, else we risk an irrecoverable break in the future. It may take longer and be more painful — at times seeming hopeless — to reach about for a more secure route, but faith cannot grow upon a concealed fear that we have conned ourselves.

Spiritual converts may not wish to explore, or can no longer express, how they went from no faith to faith, and those who have never doubted cannot understand a refusal to believe. Thus arises the assertion “you must have faith,” which does not address the central requirement to finding the comfort of faith: an inherent, slight, and subjective shift in the way in which we approach the situations in which it can be found.

We know that there is a method to magic tricks, and once we have learned the trick, we no longer see the magic. Success seems less miraculous when we know how we achieved it. I found this to be true with the publication of my book. Being aware of the editing, design, and costs made the process feel phony, as if the fact that I had done it — that it could be done by the likes of me — meant that the supposed mystery of publishing was a ruse to keep publishers in business.

Similarly, we can find ourselves explaining away our faith due to the very facts that we desire to find it and understand how we cultivated it. The deconstructing argument is attractive because we feel more intellectually honest when the “truth” is harder to accept, if only because it fallaciously suggests a higher level of thought. But the fact that we desire to sleep, eat, or love does not indicate that the sustenance these acts provide is an illusion. Why should it be that the more we understand the subtle details of our feelings the less those feelings are valid? For our own arguments

to stand up to our own scrutiny, we must slightly shift our assumptions to give weight to our own hopes.

Disputes about signs of God's existence can easily degrade to the exact point at which this shift separates those in disagreement. In listening for a spiritual calling, the wary searcher wants an undeniable declaration in a comprehensible language, but by approaching the quest this way, he is already preparing excuses or explanations. We must ask how an omnipresent God might communicate with us, not what we would accept as communication. To this end, consider art, at the heart of which is the conveyance of ideas or emotions. Artists in each medium communicate differently and in varying capacities — music's emphasis is on emotion, using sound, and literature's is on ideas, using words. Painting can be said to fall somewhere between these two — the subjects communicate ideas, but the colors and style convey emotion. If a watercolor painting of a puppy playing in fallen leaves suggests an artist's statement of thought and emotion, why wouldn't the reality of the same scene indicate the existence of the creator of reality?

Some images from the catastrophe of September 11 make the point more explicitly. To my mind, photos of satanic faces emerging from the flames and smoke of the World Trade Center and a cross that was formed in its collapse are as unambiguous as would be a voice in the sky. Yet, skeptics either credit chance or suggest that some human change has been made to facilitate the impression of significance. In this respect, these images evoke similar reactions to stories of miraculous healings. If the story is told about somebody else, we respond that it is a lie or an exaggeration. When miracles are related by a trustworthy source, we cite human misinterpretation or make claims about the power of suggestion or the power of mind over matter.

In other words, no evidence will *ever* be good enough because the decision about what it portends was made before the evidence was cited. Sometimes it seems that the more miraculous the occasion, the more simply we explain it logically. Had the firemen found a detailed 20-foot crucifix of gold at

Ground Zero, skeptics would find it even more obvious that it had already been there. Even a crucifix beaming radiant light would still allow the resolved skeptic recourse to the statement “there *must* be some explanation.”

Moreover, free will, and all the love and trust indicated by God’s allowing it, would cease to exist if the signs of God’s presence and, further, His wishes were made so explicit that we could not deny them. The statement of trust made by parents when they leave the house under a child’s care for a weekend is undermined if the child is aware that the parents have security cameras. So, too, with our relationship with God: the real value in our existence — and His — is the trust, love, and faith that would not count for anything if we were not at liberty to deny it.

Here the slight difference in perspective appears again. What I’ve written can be seen as an argument that we must be open to finding the voice of God expressed in and *as* the everyday experience of life, even where we know the explanations and processes of mundane miracles. It can also be read as an excuse to ignore the impossibility of proving the existence of God. As much as I would like to make an irrefutable argument for faith, I believe that the best that can be done is to continually present instances in which the choice to believe or not to believe must be made. The doubtful can be instructed to better understand the inexplicable, infinitely subtle, shift in perspective that begins the journey, but they must choose to make the shift themselves.

I know of no lesson that can be well learned by instruction only. We must redefine every word, reprove every thesis, and put into practice every procedure for ourselves so that we can take them for granted. We must know for ourselves that our level of thought is firmly based on the broad experience of life, which is God’s lesson to us, without worrying that details that we’ve missed might collapse our beliefs. In this sense, the Devil may truly be in the details, but only where we refuse to see even him.

# Behind on the Bills and Facing Delays

11/12/01

Just as speculation about economic cooling solidified into a downturn, I found myself half employed due to various circumstances, some of which, admittedly, I precipitated. So, when a fellow editor in my department requested to switch to part time, I was hopeful that I would be able to take her place as a full-time employee. The unstable economy, however, has understandably persuaded the company to postpone its decision until mid-January. With luck and timing, everything will work out, and the company will pull me from the financial edge just as my first child, a girl, is born into a temporarily one-income household.

But it doesn't have to be that close. It is within the power of the United States government to take measures that would help convince my company that the economy is headed for enough of a recovery to justify, *at least*, the relatively very small investment required in my borderline case. Surely, some type of stimulus package passed immediately could have enough of an effect to make the crucial difference to people who are, like me, teetering on the edge of financial stability.

According to *The New York Times*,<sup>1</sup> the Democrat-backed Senate bill addressing this issue would spend \$14.5 billion to expand unemployment benefits, \$12.3 billion to help pay for laid-off workers' health insurance, and \$19.4 billion in "business tax breaks, including a provision that would give companies an incentive to accelerate plans to invest in new factories, machinery and other equipment." Now, I'm no economist, but it seems to me that a plan that devotes \$7.4 billion *more* to making

unemployment more comfortable than to helping companies expand and create more jobs is hardly an economic *stimulus* package. In fact, it seems like a hunker-down strategy in anticipation of an extended recession — perhaps lasting, say, three more years.

“Democrats said the plan would put money quickly into the hands of people who need it most,” says *The Times*. As he told *The Washington Post*,<sup>2</sup> Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle (Democrat from South Dakota) believes that the hands of the bison industry, in particular, need filling because the industry is facing “just as much of a crisis as the airlines or as anybody else, if you’re in that industry.” I see. The bison industry needs direct financial assistance, but the business world in general — all those “anybody elses” — needs measures to encourage *hardware* expenditures and minimize workers’ drive to reenter the workforce.

Without overstating my situation, I’m pretty confident that I’m at least on the fringes of the group of those people who need money “the most.” Therefore, this may come as a shock to some politicians: I don’t want to collect unemployment benefits. I don’t want government assistance for training to pursue a new career in which I couldn’t find a job either. I want to work. I want a job to be created in the “industry that I am in,” and I want it soon enough to keep *The Price Is Right* from atrophying my brain too much to recognize the price of political baloney.

Believe me, I understand the urge to help those who can’t seem to get a foothold in the American dream. In fact, I’ve outlined future columns that excoriate ruthless moneygrubbers for not voluntarily making our country’s class structure more equitable. If they weren’t so greedy, common-sense economic stimulus packages wouldn’t have to overcome the masses’ natural aversion to helping them.

But I also understand the painful truth that rich people experience everything having to do with money to a higher degree, so it is folly to try to invent a system that benefits everybody but them. With something on the order of 60% of

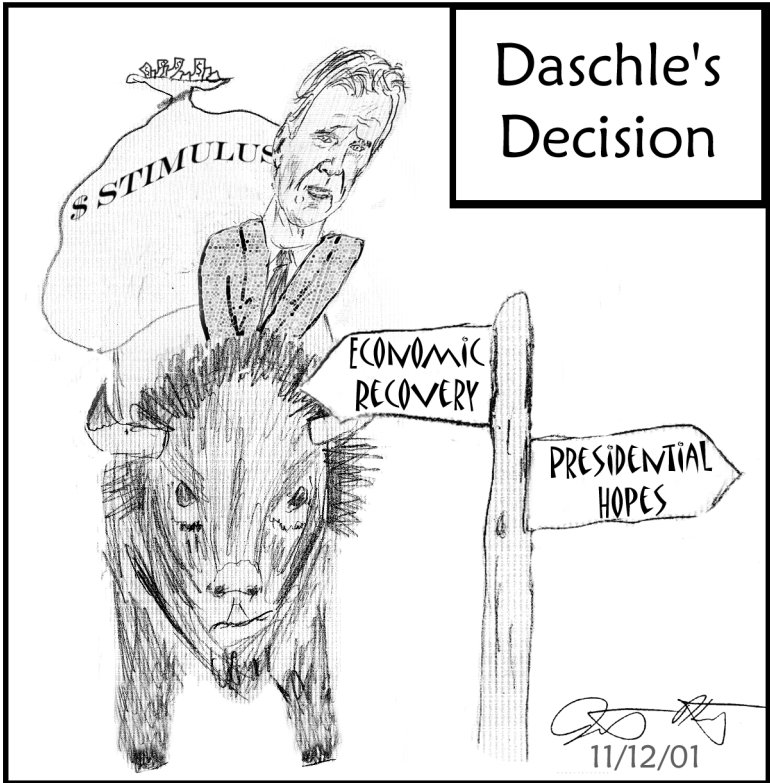
Americans invested in the stock market and 100% of working Americans invested in the economy, the financial world cannot be teased apart according to a scale of wealth as far as economic stimulus is concerned. It is not uncharitable to acknowledge the reality that anything that benefits the economy will disproportionately benefit those who have a disproportionate investment in it. In fact, there is only one group that benefits from the stagnant financial activity of redistributing wealth: politicians who cast themselves as Robin Hood and his Merry Partisans handing out money to the poor, while double-counting their own cuts and inviting their wealthy friends to get in line with the rest of us.

Frankly, I would welcome financial incentives for my employer, which, due to the nature of its business, operates with almost no “factories, machinery and other equipment,” to expand and invest — even if it does make rich people richer — because it will certainly make my life easier, too. To my way of thinking, I would actually gain more because I would go from budgeting for socks to being able to purchase cute outfits for my daughter from time to time, while the wealthy will only gain a zero or two on their pieces of paper.

I'll admit that I have more time than most people to read and think about these things, lately, but I can't believe that the entire situation seems more clear to me, at least in broad terms, than to Senators with staffs full of “experts.” I can't help wondering at Mr. Daschle's motives. I wonder if he's been throwing those expensive shoes up on his coffee table at the end of the day and recalling the toll that a slumping economy took on President Bush's father, even after that president's war made him immensely popular. Mr. Daschle wouldn't consider sabotaging his nation's economy for the sake of his political party, or even his own career, would he?

Quoth Mr. Daschle, in the *Associated Press*,<sup>3</sup> in response to passage of the Republican-backed House stimulus bill: “Our economic health is too important to fall victim to politics or ideology.” Amen, brother. Now practice what you preach. I'm not

fooled, bison man, and I'll make sure that all of my children, starting with that kicking girl in my wife's belly, never are either.



1. Stevenson, Richard W. "Democrats' Recovery Plan Moves Forward in Senate." *The New York Times* 9 November 2001
2. Kessler, Glenn "Senate Panel Backs Democrats' Stimulus Bill." *The Washington Post* 9 November 2001: A30
3. "Daschle Seeks Economic Bipartisanship." *The Associated Press* 27 October 2001

# Making a Better Victim: How a National ID Will Help

11/19/01

Proposals for a national ID card cast my memory back eight years to an incident in which I was an unwilling victim of one of the oldest con jobs in the book. While the record store in which I worked was extremely busy, two men approached my cash register to purchase a cheap tape. They were very talkative as I removed the security apparatus, scanned the bar code, and took their money. Just as the cash drawer slid into its locked position, one of them stated, “Hold on. I gave you a twenty, and you gave me change for a five.”

Although I don't condone what they do, I can understand con artists. Even my moderate — and somewhat forced — teenage forays into deception taught me the psychological game that is behind every con. For example, a confident, tough-looking young man buying beer in a grocery store (in states where it's possible) can be reasonably sure that a carefully chosen, timid, early-teen cashier will not have the force of will, if he has the desire, to scrutinize a fake ID very carefully.

I observed this same psychological stratagem from the other end when I turned to the record store manager at the register next to mine. Hearing me tell her that I was almost positive that I had given the correct change, but that she could compare the cash in the drawer with the register receipts, the men suddenly became impatient. The manager looked at the line of people, looked at the men, and looked at me with an expression indicative of the natural fear of conflict and responsibility. She made her decision.

When a scam hinges on a matter of judgment, as with an ID, the victim can feel additional pressure. However, the technology has recently appeared to virtually eliminate this problem in IDs by decreasing the degree of judgment required. A microchip on a card can be encoded with biometric data to verify its carrier by — to name a few measures — fingerprint, eye scan (retina or iris), voice, and signature, with the promise of full DNA checks down the road.

As creepy as it may sound, I wouldn't object vociferously to biometric identifiers being stored on an ID card as long as they are purely to prove that I am the person whom the card says that I am — like a high-tech photograph. The danger is not with the idea of a national ID itself, but with the suggested uses that seem to linger behind assurances of security and the dangled bait of convenience. The dark side of technology looms in the specter of vast databases of centralized information for which a high-tech ID becomes an access point.

For the sake of argument, suppose I learned this lesson at a mythical college called Caramely Lemon University, at which students can link their IDs to money accounts for use at campus stores, including one that delivers pizza. One hypothetical associate of mine worked at a campus general store and, when customers forgot their receipts, he would jot down their names and put the receipts in his pocket. After this slight sleight of hand, all that stood between his friends and a free pizza was the effort of memorizing the name and student ID number on a receipt and convincing an underpaid and overworked pizza deliverer that the ID card had been lost and, therefore, could not be checked.

Will the federal government do a better job of controlling access to dangerously aggregated information? Probably. But will well-financed, professional criminals be more adept at their craft than a bunch of stoned teenagers? Absolutely. No security can guarantee 100% repulsion of a group with an inside guy (or gal), an object that in the criminals' minds justifies the risk, and the chutzpah to execute the charade. Furthermore, the certainty of security decreases as the area being protected expands. The

most certain way to protect critical clusters of private information is to keep them separate, thus increasing the number of human gateways that must be maneuvered.

It is not difficult to imagine that the more technologically efficient ID cards get, the less scrutiny humans will devote to old-fashioned measures such as pictures. If the computer says that the fingerprints match, who's to quibble over hair and eye color or nose size? Raising the price of the technology and the degree of privacy sacrificed may very well impede underage drinking, but the really dangerous criminals, such as terrorists, might actually benefit because their more-expensive fake IDs will face fewer questions.

Our modern society hates to admit it, but we cannot just wish human nature away, and con artists specialize in manipulating that nature. The record store manager proved this when she used her key to bypass the register's built-in processes and hand the men the money that they claimed to deserve. If the store had been known to keep all of its cash in one register, the same perpetrators could easily have raised the stakes using larger bills.

I don't know exactly what fraud is buried within the idea of a high-tech socialist-medical-plan card or whether a national ID will be used to track and discredit independent thinkers nationwide. I do know that, at the end of the day, my cash register was short by exactly \$15. And it may be that, somewhere out there in the world, that record store manager intends to apply for a government job at an airport.

## Thanksgiving Therapy

11/26/01

Despite the natural impulse to do the opposite — faced with reflexive mall shopping and after-meal doldrums — I think it is especially important during this time of year to keep both the mind and body active. Furthermore, after we have overindulged in turkey and pie, our swollen bellies and lethargic mood create an optimum environment for self-loathing to fester. It is therefore advisable to include a type of therapy — reconciling our gluttonous revelry with the travesty that some people proclaim it to celebrate — in our thinking. Toward this end, and with full knowledge of the busy lives of modern Americans, consider this essay to be a springboard for mental exercise, to be performed during an evening walk, aerobics, weight lifting, or any other bodily workout.

When I was in young-person school, the teachers presented Thanksgiving as a time of miraculous peace and harmony, celebrating two peoples' coming together to share a meal as the first step toward the creation of the greatest nation on the planet. By the time I graduated from college, however, the picture that I was taught to be "truth" had changed to that of the unilateral slaughter of a native people by malevolent, foreign white men, comparable to gunning down a neighbor who is carrying a Jell-O mold up the walk of the house into which you've just moved.

Because history has become such a subjective subject, the discussion of our forefathers is very much political, so, as with politics, facts and statistics are often stated to support nearly opposite claims. Moreover, people's positions are so nearly

articles of faith that undeniable facts are dismissed as beside the point. For example, if I cite an instance of aggression on either side, the pilgrims or the native Americans, my antagonist could claim that prior grievances, which are not documented in a roll call of casualties, were the “root causes” of that aggression.

On matters of opinion, we do not look at a spec-sheet of relevant facts and change our personalities based on them. Nor should we attempt to do so because we cannot verbalize all of the facts that go into the formation of our opinions (including our emotions and the human-nature preferences of our souls). We should be open to statistics that prove us wrong and able to find those that prove us right, but these are merely the visible parts of underlying thought. Without thought as a reasonable base, statistics can be, and frequently are, cited as irrefutable proof of whatever conclusion is chosen beforehand. There is a balance to be struck between research and philosophy.

Recently, Michael A. Bellesiles, a history professor at Emory University provided an example of a skewed perspective created by imbalanced thought. The earthshaking conclusion of his award-winning book, *Arming America: The Origins of National Gun Culture*, is that the historical prevalence of gun ownership in this country is a myth. Unfortunately, Bellesiles gleaned crucial statistical proof directly from San Franciscan probate records that were destroyed, mostly by fire, during a 1906 earthquake, well before he was born. I picture Prof. Bellesiles looking out the window of his office in Atlanta, before he began researching his book, with his feet on the desk and a cup of coffee held between his hands, asking himself, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I found that gun-rights advocates didn’t really have a precedent dating back to the Bill of Rights and beyond?”

Since history is not entirely an arithmetical tallying of dates and firearms, how do we find truth in the Thanksgiving conundrum? First, we must understand ourselves. Even beyond personal indigestion, we live in terribly cynical, self-loathing times. While a “pilgrimist” might point to the more “modern” social structures of the European newcomers, a “nativist” might

suggest that the indigenous folks' reciprocity with nature had a value that *we've* only begun to rediscover now that the Industrial Revolution is finally cooling. Whether romanticizing a different culture or reveling in our own, either side goes too far if it does not acknowledge that both groups existed in a much different — in some ways even barbaric — world.

Each person might have a different opinion about who, the pilgrims or the Indians (as we used to call them), was more moral. My own belief is that each group could claim people, and acts, that were more moral than some of the other. Perhaps there will never be complete consensus on this point, but there doesn't have to be.

However much intellectual exercise helps to develop the muscles of your mind, it is important to remember that it is just an exercise. I don't know anybody who lifts weights for its own sake, or even anybody who walks for the sake of putting one foot in front of the other. Pondering Thanksgiving should lead to the therapeutic conclusion that it is our experience of the holiday — in the present — that counts, not the fashionable take on the history that provided the particulars of the day and inspired the decorations.

We've built a wonderful country for ourselves, and we should be proud and... well... thankful. Beyond academic aerobics, we gain nothing from our understanding of the conflicts and sins of the past unless we resolve to do what we wish our ancestors had done — in this case, all come around the table together to celebrate the good that our nation has done in the world and the good that it has yet to do.

This Thanksgiving, I am thankful that I have finally, several years after graduating, repaired the damage that was done in college to my ability to understand reality. I am also thankful for the God-given right to begin the rest of my life from where I stand now, on this soil, with a degree of happiness and satisfaction.

# George Harrison and the Spiritual Spectrum

12/03/01

I've found it odd how much the death of George Harrison has affected me. Considering that I wasn't the world's biggest teenage Beatles fan until the late 80s and early 90s, I'm notably younger than the generation that grew up with George and for whom his death is a direct reminder of their own aging. If this were the only factor, however, George's death would be more traumatic for Baby Boomers than was John Lennon's because John was taken early and unnaturally. George, though young yet, was not a victim of his fame and lived his life through.

For most people, any grief they feel is less self-centered. We feel close to some stars, even when they are no longer in the public spotlight. Although I was always a John guy, from what I've read and heard, if you liked him from afar, you were better off not meeting him up close. But I would have liked to have met George.

Their post-Beatles careers are instructive. As Paul's conscientiously poppy ditties and John's deliberately artsy strains lost their potency for me, I came to consider George's solo-career songs to be the strongest — if only, I thought at the time, it weren't for all that God stuff. Paul, with his hodgepodge, medley-esque writing style, needed John, who often lapsed into painful monotony, and vice versa. George had been a solo artist even when part of the band.

In retrospect, George's accomplishments while a Beatle were equally admirable. He was spurred on by the others, certainly, and influenced by them, but his maintaining his own voice in such close proximity to Lennon and McCartney evinces a

certainty and fortitude that few have. In fact, it struck me, when I first heard the *Anthology 3* album, that more George songs, such as “All Things Must Pass,” would have made *Abbey Road* even better. At any rate, placing as many songs that could qualitatively compete with, and even surpass, the output of that famous duo as he did was an amazing success.

But George’s greatest legacy lies beyond the cultural stardom and musical influence shared by the other Beatles. His interests placed him on the broad end of the spectrum of spiritual conversion, in the crucial position of helping others to begin their journeys. The average questioning youth does not jump right in with Thomas Merton or even Deepak Chopra, let alone Aquinas or Maimonides. The path to faith of any branch must begin with vague speculation and move only gradually toward full explication of theological particulars.

Many religious people are quick to dismiss the frequently flighty, even flaky, spiritual attempts of celebrities. Because every layman deserves his or her own conduit to belief, however, there must be capillaries of hip public figures who show that it is alright to ask spiritual questions and believe in the goodness of God. At this point, it is less important that a “fan” finds a specific church than that he begins to look. The people of a church must have faith that their own beliefs will prove true to others. Therefore, it doesn’t matter, extremely, what a role model chooses as his own path, or even how well he follows it.

To my mind, the difference is almost inconsequential between, say, Bob Dylan becoming a Christian and Cat Stevens converting to Islam. As a person’s faith grows, she will put less stock in the opinions of fellow travelers and look to those who have made consideration of God an emphasis of their lives. As long as a celebrity has the courage, compassion, and honesty to make less-bitterly destructive statements than John Lennon’s facile “God is a concept by which we measure our pain,” he or she is doing the good deed of opening the subject for consideration.

Among those who have bent pop culture toward spirituality, George Harrison was perhaps the greatest — he was a Beatle,

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after all, and his biggest post-Beatles songs sprang forth from religion. In the attenuated symbology of popular culture, he represented the meditative passageway to something deeper and more important than a backbeat. He was the quiet one.

For two days after he died, I listened to all of the albums with George Harrison that I own. I played them in reverse chronological order, from 1989's *Best of Dark Horse* to 1963's *Please Please Me*, as if to bring Mr. Harrison from death back to his youth. Now, I can do no more than continue forward in my own way of following his advice that "everything else can wait, but the search for God cannot wait."

Goodbye, George. Perhaps I'll meet you in Heaven.

## The Driving Forces in Iraq

12/10/01

“No leader of any country, no matter how cruel, inhumane or stupid he might be, would purposely deny his own people the necessities of life,” wrote Al Taylor in an October 23 letter to the editor of *The Providence Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

Upon digging up the edition of that paper with “Saddam Wouldn’t Be That Bad to His People” for this column, I was surprised to discover that it had the same author as an email that I recently received attacking my essay, “Who Are These People?” I say “surprised,” not “shocked.” But maligning Mr. Taylor is not my intention. He has just provided such a concise — albeit extreme — example of a way of thinking that I quote him directly to avoid accusations that I am creatively rebuffing arguments that nobody is making.

The letter then states that “the people of his country [are] the only reason any leader exists.” This is a noble, demand-side view of leadership. Antithetically, through my wife’s experience as a bar tender for an exclusive beach club, I’ve observed that certain members of the modern aristocracy still feel that the average citizen is alive expressly for the purpose of serving them. Although other views exist, the prevailing political philosophy in most of the Western world today places leaders, as does Mr. Taylor, in the role of the chauffeurs of their people.

However, maintaining the good graces of their passengers is a particularly modern prerequisite for governments. That Al could so dogmatically state his assumptions is a testament to how much good our culture and our country have done in this

area over the past few centuries. Assuming that today's truth has been held as true always and by all is a natural inclination. Nevertheless, it is a distinct privilege of the long-removed descendants of revolutionaries to be able to forget the reality that spurred the movement toward representative government and to believe that the entire world has been won over by what is so obviously the proper relationship of government to people.

Our fortunate problem in America is that we have difficulty comprehending that a leader would decimate his people to pursue unattainable ends. To the extent that U.S. (or U.N.) sanctions are to blame for suffering in Iraq, our nation can be forgiven by the fact that we couldn't have anticipated that they would be allowed to go this far by *that* nation's leadership. It took a long time for the situation to degrade to its current state, and the shifty, watchful eyes of every despot and potential despot in the world oblige the United States to avoid the appearance of rewarding Saddam's willingness to play chicken with his own people in the back seat.

If the Iraqis were empowered to research a balanced explanation of the causes of their predicament, it is likely that their distress would eventually become sufficiently intense to spark a revolution. To avoid an overthrow, Saddam uses the pervasive strategy of dictators everywhere: deflecting blame toward the United States. Outside the stadium where the dictator's is the only voice, foreign spectators, right down to lowly letter writers, act as spokespeople for his propaganda if they do not place him at the hub of their analyses.

As our fight against terrorism intersects with our desire to stop the needless languishing of the people of Iraq, we cannot allow our resolve to be curbed by beliefs about how leaders should act in an ideal world, or even how they do act in the Western world. With so many people's lives at stake in both initiatives, our actions cannot be indecisive or delayed.

So-called "smart" sanctions that would more efficiently target Saddam and not his people should, perhaps, have been instituted several years ago, but now they merely represent an attempt to

salvage a wreck of a strategy. They may serve to duct tape the steering column in place, but on the unpredictable path of post–September 11 international affairs, they will not hold. Further sanctions would only prolong the unnatural circumstances of the Iraqi people and extend Saddam Hussein’s reign. His rhetoric and his oppressive might would come to outweigh, even more, the drive of his people to be free of him. Yet, for the same reasons, we cannot simply cease the sanctions.

To give the children of Iraq a deservedly promising future, we must ensure that the nation’s tyrannical leader is replaced by a government that agrees with Al Taylor... at least about a driver’s responsibility to his passengers.

1. Taylor, Al “Saddam wouldn’t be that bad to his people.” *The Providence Journal* 23 October 2001: B-07

## Guest of Honor

12/17/01

On a recent Friday evening, on my way from the unemployment office to the voting booth, I walked past a popular restaurant, the entire dining area of which had been appropriated by a group of luminaries. Some of the regular patrons, rebuffed by the special occasion's temporary doorman, were looking through a window at people who were important enough to intrude upon the weekly traditions of so many families.

Although this injustice put scorn in the smile that the sight, through the glass, of so many tipsy politicians, academics, writers, and business people evoked upon my face, both the scorn and smile quickly melted into concerned horror. Floating around among the guests was a... thing. For lack of an accurate word that wouldn't betray my honest story by insinuating fiction, I'll call it a monster. It was equal parts mouth and stomach, with eyes all over its body.

As I watched, its yellow teeth enveloped a lady Senator, a recent proponent of a universal dental plan. The outside crowd had dispersed, so I ran toward the door to warn the diners. The doorman stopped me. Through urgent gasps, I tried to convey to him the threat to those inside.

"Sure," the large man said. "I'll go clear the room; you go back to the liquor store and call a cab."

He crossed his arms and didn't move.

Before I could comprehend the man's actions, let alone explain that I was serious, not drunk, the monster slithered by,

and I ducked. When I looked up, the doorway was empty except for a black shoe lying on its side.

I rushed toward the dining area, nearly toppling an elderly woman, who shared a last name with many important buildings. “Ma’am,” I said, “you’ve got to get out of here. There’s a monster in the building eating everybody.”

“A-haha,” she laughed, apparently mishearing. “You must mean our guest of honor. I haven’t seen him, yet, but I hear he’s quite exotic in features. As for food, I recommend the *tartuffe limon*. It was my contribution to the buffet.”

I hadn’t uttered so much as a correction of her French when the woman disappeared under the dessert table with a surprised, but subdued, “oh,” which was followed by a guileless belch from beneath the tablecloth. At the far end of the table, a paunchy man was discriminating among some deviled eggs. Pointing to where the patroness had disappeared, I shouted to him, “Watch out! I think your honoree is a monster!”

“Who are you to judge?” he scolded. “Your prejudice makes his noble acts seem wicked. I’ll have you know that he’s helped many a person to win the Nobel...” Before he could finish his thought or wipe the egg from his chin, the altruist was gone.

What followed was a carnage that I shudder to describe. The gore that splattered on the carpet and streaked the wall-length mirrors was worsened by the sounds, or lack thereof, that accompanied it. Apart from the prudent gasps of dignitaries as they took their final breaths, I heard no noise but the polite conversations continuing around the room.

“Have you met him?” somebody asked another, who replied, “Yes, at the White House.” A third commented, “A representative of a threatened culture.”

Unable to face the spectacle, I hid behind a column and only looked again when a stately voice proclaimed, “There is much that we can learn from our friend here for there is much that we do not understand about him.” The gentleman clapped the beast on the back, poking an eye there, and continued, “And the fault for that is ours.”

To prove compassion for this noble proclamation, the monster ate the statesman humanely — in one gulp.

With dumb confusion, the five remaining diners looked from where the advocate had been to the mouth into which he'd disappeared. The monster paused, perhaps of indigestion, but kept an eye on each of those who stood there in the otherwise empty room.

Then two broke out in unison, "Spare *us*, at least! We've supported you from the very time that you rose above society's mire!" In the bloody mirror, I saw their pleading faces, and their fingers pointing suggestively, behind their hands, at me. If it understood their insinuation, the monster ignored it and gobbled them up, pointy fingers and all.

The nearest man, a much applauded professor of English, with patches on his elbows, knelt and, with arms outstretched, said, "Though I personally railed against the imperialist oppressions, perpetrated by fascistic elitist capitalists, that incentivized the agitated reprisals for which we all now answer, I comprehend the perceptivities of the Other and, in cognitionation of the acts wherewith Mother Nature will only benefit by the extirpation of all humanity..." But he managed to say no more before the blunt maw of death left only the echo of his voice and the jingle of the keys to his Volvo as they fell.

Then a famous opinion writer, to whom the professor had recently been talking shrugged his shoulders and said, "What's to be done? His appetite is of our creation, after all."

I hoped, as the pundit met his end, that he would sate the appetite of which he spoke, but then the monster turned to the final morsel but for me, a young female student whose last words, with no one left to heed a speech, were, "All deserve to eat."

The hall grew quiet. I heard a grumble in the monster's stomach. It slowly backed me into a corner. I closed my eyes and awaited my fate. Nothing happened, so I peeked between my fingers. It was still there, all eyes on me. I breathed in as quietly as I could. I smelled its foul breath. I spoke.

“Aren’t you going to eat me — the one person who would have stopped you had any of the others listened?”

Then, in a deep voice full of gravel, but yet sincere, came the answer. “You’ve too much sense to have much flavor.”

## Crossing the Line on Christmas

12/24/01

Since this is my first Christmas as a baptized and confirmed Catholic, I thought it a great opportunity to use a column that falls on Christmas Eve to reflect on the holiday. Also because this is my first Catholic Christmas, I still understand the inclination to tune out proselytizers. In fact, I confess that certain “buzzwords” still make me flinch when stated too theatrically because they are so facile that they can sound insincere. “Salvay-shun!”

I consider talking about God’s love for us to be much like talking about my love for my wife. I’m not entirely comfortable describing it — not the least because all of the applicable words have been diluted by repetition and have become harbingers of cliché. This humbles me, a word man, to say, but words cannot describe everything directly. The best love poems are those that describe a scene of love but not the love itself. Powerful love can only be expressed through actions and the application of the lessons of that love to unrelated areas of life.

The undercurrent of the religious stories that surround this time of year constitutes one such expression, although it has been overwhelmed in recent years by secular usurpation. Only the most classic of the secular stories capture even a hint of the underlying message of the season, and to the extent that they succeed, they raise the same question about belief that movies beg in all areas of life: Have the stories captured a truth despite dealing in fiction, or should the fiction teach us something about the construction of truths in life?

I know that *It's a Wonderful Life* is fiction, but what about the Biblical events that the holiday is actually meant to celebrate? Hopefully, one day, I will push through the fun-house mirror of everything's-false holiday traditions to reach the degree of faith that seems so simple to those who have it. I *am* at the level of faith to declare that I believe there to be a God. I *have* chosen the Catholic Church as promoting the vision of God in which I find the most truth and providing, through traditions and teachings, the most beneficial regimen for contemplating Him. But I must confess that I still question many of the statements of fact that my Church asks me to accept on faith.

This is natural. Part of the lifelong journey of faith is in critically, but openly, examining belief's evidence to discern whether each clue is literal truth (historical facts about Jesus), conceptual truth draped over symbolism (the ancient Hebrew account of the creation), or legend (Sampson).

While two people who have faith in God, even in Jesus, can debate whether particular Biblical events *did* happen, the question of whether they *could* have happened is the point beyond which there is no room for compromise. Once the "yes" or "no" has been spoken, the will to cross the line must derive from the individual. This is the point at which one side begins to tune out the proselytizing of the other.

So how do we address this polarizing "yes" or "no" question? We walk the line. Atheists find it easy to imagine the "historical" Jesus deluding himself into believing that he had been sent by God, with centuries of too easy belief unfairly counting as its own proof for us today. I find it easy to imagine choosing atheism in order to feel godlike by believing that a human can understand the heart of reality through the intellect, with the inexplicability of the inexplicable unfairly counting as its own proof that mystery is nothing more than unknown details or outright deception.

I have never seen an event as strikingly miraculous as many of those described in the Bible. However, I constantly encounter the limitations of my understanding of reality, and I've seen, even in my lifetime, supposedly obvious facts overturned as

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misinterpretations. As a word man, I am also acutely aware that symbolic language can ring more true than can description. Furthermore, the lines between legend, interpreted truth, and historical truth blur when approached, whether from a position of logic or of faith.

So to the question of “could,” I suggest that perhaps we’ve been let to stray for a reason, and we would not stray if, like the ancient Hebrews, every generation got its own major miracle. In the spirit of acknowledging the trust denoted by being given the gift free will, I take it as a privilege to be deemed worthy of living this much of my life with only little miracles to sustain me.

As for “did” — watching the sunrise over snow and a river last year on Christmas morning, I became certain of God’s love. And for actions and reality to fully express that love, all things must be possible.

Happy birthday, Jesus, and merry Christmas to all!

## Sleight of Symbolism

12/31/01

With Palestinian government papers reporting that desiccated bodies of Palestinian children have been linked to Israelis who knead matzo balls with their blood and European reporters spreading bald-faced lies about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, leaders in every sphere, from government to religion to the arts, should be publicly demanding a change in the attitudes of everybody from Arafat to the editors of *The Guardian*.

The spin on this issue is, of course, related to general sociopolitical biases that run the spectrum of world issues for people on both the Left and the Right. But when it comes to Israel, these predispositions catch the ancient ill wind of anti-Semitism, which, throughout history, has both inspired specific actions and been an underlying impulse yielding complex convictions and world views. Anti-Semitism provides a prime example of the way in which philosophical — even artistic — ideals can be misappropriated into real life toward ulterior ends because the hatred and distrust are lashed to a framework of symbolism that sails the general public right past real, practical issues.

When studying literature and music in college, I was struck by the pervasiveness of, at best, Jews being put in an unflattering light. From T.S. Eliot to Mussorgsky in *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Jews have been used in artwork more explicitly as symbols than has any other group. Likewise, in constructing a picture of reality that will keep their region's masses in poverty, Middle Eastern leaders use Jews — even more than they use the much more powerful United States — as symbolic of oppression

to distract from the fact that the leaders themselves directly and deliberately perpetuate inequality.

The anti-Semitism of the Western societal elite is more subtly ingrained in their thinking. According to Tom Gross, in a November 1 article for *National Review Online*,<sup>1</sup> “When it comes to public pronouncements, [Alan Rusbridger of London’s *Guardian* newspaper] usually seems unable to resist the prevailing tide of ‘enlightened’ opinion in Europe — a tide which can only encourage attempts to destroy Israel.” What *offends* me about anti-Semitism among supposedly enlightened liberals is not the bias, per se, but the hypocrisy. What *frightens* me about it is the perfect marriage of perennial prejudice with a fashionable social doctrine that preaches tolerance. Whereas the mullahs and sheiks cite Zionist oppression to distract from their own, Western aristocrats pervert the language of egalitarianism to ensure that they maintain their privileged positions in our society.

As ironic as it may seem that Jews — specifically Israelis — would fall victim to both of these mirror-image schemes, an almost symbiotic relationship has developed between Middle Eastern tyrants and phony Western would-be liberators. The Arab ruling class has created a group of suffering victims at which the Western elite can point without inadvertently drawing attention to their own advantages. Moreover, those same regimes have raised the specter of Western imperialism that Western liberals find to be such a compelling image.

In an essay in the November 4 *New York Times Magazine*,<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Rosen suggested that Western antipathy is partly in reaction to Jewish tolerance. In 15th century Spain, he says, Jews “posed a far greater theological challenge” to European Christians than did Muslims because they “believed that adherents of other faiths could find their own path to God.” It is important to remember that specific manifestations of the beliefs of a religion can and do change over time, particularly as demographic groups in other spheres of life fluctuate in their correlation to it. Rosen’s historical observation of a period when Christianity had been expropriated by the privileged class seems

to relate very clearly to the American Left's increasing suppression of Christianity and embracement of Islam, not just since September 11, but for the latter half of the 1900s.

As a very recent convert to Catholicism, my understanding is that the Second Vatican Council was meant to turn the Church from the direction that Christianity had taken as it became enmeshed with European politics over many centuries back toward the exceedingly tolerant teachings of its Founder. This official acknowledgment of a mistaken direction suggests that Christianity, in general, has been separating from the elite and their value system and returning to tenets that are more in keeping with the principles of the majority of its followers. With reference to Rosen, it is conceivable that, in the eyes of Western "enlightened" intellectuals, Christians have joined the Jews as a tolerant group that must be made to look intolerant.

It is unlikely that the Christian majority in the United States and around the world will long stand for the vilification of its values, which are, of course, shared in many respects with Jews. Indeed, dramatically increased Bible sales since September 11 are only one indicator that we are in the midst of a reassertion of Judeo-Christian morality. But it is important that people of all faiths and nations remember this moment of unified cause, with the strategies of the dissembling elite minorities around the world being laid bare.

In the end, who cares about symbology? Anti-Semitism is wrong whether the driving impetus behind it is to oppress or demean millions of non-Jews or not. People are being hurt and killed in reality, not in theory.

1. Gross, Tom "New Prejudices for Old: The Euro press and the Intifada." *National Review Online* 1 November 2001  
<<http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment-gross110101.shtml>>
2. Rosen, Jonathan "The Uncomfortable Question of Anti-Semitism." *The New York Times Magazine* 4 November 2001

## Good Intentions Gone Bad

01/07/02

There *is* a role for government in ensuring that all citizens who are willing to work are able to put roofs over their heads. Where there is a dearth of affordable housing, a willing population ought to help to make up the difference. Where residences are in dangerous disrepair, citizens ought to work to make buildings safe. And while it may not be optimal, government offers a reasonably efficient way to accomplish these ends. The Neighborhood Opportunities Program in Rhode Island is — was — one possible solution.

However, with no other knowledge than what *The Providence Journal* provided in a December 6th article that was spurred by several reverends' arrest-garnering protest of its defunding, I was pretty ambivalent about the program's fate.<sup>1</sup> I also have to admit that, were it not for my intention to write this column, I would not have done the research to change my mind.

The first two sentences of the article, by Karen Lee Ziner and Edward Fitzpatrick, set the tone for me to distrust the objectivity of the facts that followed. "Perhaps homeless people should post themselves across the street from Governor Almond's home in Lincoln. Perhaps other clergy members should commit acts of civil disobedience."

As well intentioned as writers may be, activist reporting can undermine thinking readers' support for specific programs or issues. When the opinion of a reporter is this overt, readers are compelled — indeed, required — to question the validity of cited facts and to wonder what information has been left out. Based on

the reporting provided in this particular article, I would have had no idea what the withdrawn \$5 million dollars had been meant to finance. With only a minor degree of cynicism, I can imagine a scenario in which the money would be slated as payment for a local multimillionaire to commission a group to walk the city of Providence asking homeless people what color carpeting they would like in an affordable apartment *if* one existed.

Although the actual act that created the program is vague in its language (and more-specific information is difficult to find), there appears to have been a reasonable and laudable plan for the money. However, after offering their own opinions and conveying the thoughts of the arrested reverends in great detail, Ziner and Fitzpatrick apparently had no space remaining to explain what, exactly, the advocacy groups had lost.

Newspaper readers aren't generally stupid people, nor are they generally malicious. Given a reasonable program that, after all, costs a sum that is measly by government-spending standards, they will tend to lend their support to efforts to help others. But honest, thinking readers also tend to spot rhetorical tricks such as opening an article in the news section of a paper with raw opinion. Attentive readers will wonder why a reporter quotes a government official through a third person, especially when that person is a cause's advocate saying that "the governor said, "I just can't do any better."'" (Busy readers do not have the time to sort through all of those consecutive quotation marks.)

Readers' suspicion ought to be further heightened when the reporters raise a tangential issue that is controversial and deserving of detail in its own right. In this case, that issue was state trooper salary increases passed by the Rhode Island Unclassified Pay Plan Board a week earlier. Not only does introduction of this particular controversy muddy the story by more directly involving *legislative* corruption than *executive* indifference, it also creates more questions about missing information. Because this is not the real topic of the article, the authors used a tilted shorthand by citing the creation of "a new *top tier* of jobs" (italics mine) without noting that the upper-level

deals were part of an across-the-board raise involving the complexities of contracts and unions.

Based on even my limited research about the housing program, I believe the withdrawal of such an admirably intended pittance for people unable to find affordable housing to have been disgraceful when there is so much waste and corruption in the Rhode Island system. On the other hand, I would have refused to voice an opinion based on the skewed and incomplete information provided by *The Providence Journal*.

This is, of course, only one small issue, but the lesson bleeds into all areas of concern to citizens of Rhode Island, the United States of America, and the entire world. We ordinary folk haven't the time to become reporters ourselves, digging up the facts about every issue in which we may feel compelled to become involved. That's what newspapers are for.

Actually — pardon me — that's what they're *supposed* to be for.

1. Ziner, Karen Lee "Ready for Round 2." *The Providence Journal*  
6 December 2001: B-01

## Political Reading

01/14/02

In a column that I wrote for Christmas, I asked, about holiday movies, “Have the stories captured a truth despite dealing in fiction, or should the fiction teach us something about the construction of truths in life?” As the weeks have moved along, this question has remained in my thoughts because it goes beyond literary theory (as well as beyond Christmas).

We live in an era of compartmentalization, in which the related natures of various aspects of our lives are not necessarily apparent. It has long been my contention that fictional literature — defined even as mere storytelling — is a magnificent tool for understanding those related natures, and a person’s preferred treatment of literature frequently reflects his or her view of reality.

There have, of course, always been schools of thought in literature, the broadest dealing with its purpose — to entertain or to instruct. This rift is really one of emphasis because literature cannot help but be instructive, whether the author accepts the responsibility or not, and learning and thinking can be very entertaining. Among readers who look for lessons of one kind or another in fiction, differences of opinion about purpose can be traced, to a degree, along sociopolitical lines. These differences are subtle, but crucial.

“Conservative” readers look for literature to observe and *comment on* real life, so an author’s intentions are important to the extent that they assist understanding of and grappling with the comment. Translating a difficult political situation into fiction, for example, can aid discussion by putting space between the

argument and personal investment and diminishing the need to know specific terms (meaning: jargon). In this camp, authors address complex issues of real life through stories, and readers use books as playing fields on which to kick around larger truths of life.

Fiction that is made difficult, either through surreal writing or abstract reading, can obscure common sense answers to real questions. Deconstructionists and other “modern” literary types like to complicate literature because it allows them to obfuscate life’s real issues in support of foregone conclusions. “Liberal” readers look for literature to *reflect* life, so subconscious beliefs of the author (e.g., related to racism and sexism) are more important than his or her intentions, thereby making it possible to suggest that finding strains and subtext in fiction is evidence that they exist in the real world.

Because they are looking for undercurrents that they believe to exist inherently rather than statements that the author has intentionally made apparent, “liberal” readers’ ability to find (or create) examples allows them to believe that their themes (usually centering around oppression) are universal across time and space. Given that this type of analysis has come to take use of particular words or superficial character relationships as signals of the existence of a presupposed “hidden language,” it is not surprising that the search for this subtext has been remarkably successful.

In my days as an undergraduate English major, I frequently observed the sensibilities of young women set afire by stories describing the state of their gender 100 years ago as if no time or change had passed between then and the meeting of that class. I also heard professors drag unwilling classics into discussions on which they had no direct bearing by building entire analyses around individual sentences, passing characters, or even footnotes.

The danger arose when the theoretical exercises of academics leaped out of the classroom and fiction into the town hall and non-fiction. Actions and ideas have blended into a

collection of “texts,” all as part of a larger “discourse,” with the faiths of diversity, tolerance, and political correctness acting as the pivot-points of judgment. As a “text,” murder can be excused as an expression of the frustration associated with disagreeable ideas. As part of a “discourse” that can lead to murder, offensive language — or even beliefs or conclusions that are erroneously taken as prejudiced — demands a ruined livelihood or, at least, disgrace and blackballing.

Most conservatives would likely agree that society, even all of reality, is a “text,” given the word’s newly broad definition. The subtle, but crucial, difference is the thinking that leads to this conclusion. The “liberal” readers have taken the contrived nature of fiction to be a reflection of the contrived nature of a reality that humans have created. In this construction, self-interest has led to systems and beliefs with the main objective of oppressing others.

To “conservative” readers, humans react to a larger reality, and their ability to influence, let alone create, systems within it is limited. In the plainest terms, God is the author of reality, and humans can only try to comprehend the comment as it relates to the discrete parts of our lives.

# Off Sides in the Culture War: Islam and Affirmative Action

01/21/02 & 01/28/02

### More than “Not Fair”

The truth of the First Amendment—supporting belief that if we silence voices that are unpopular to us now we will have opened the way for ourselves to be silenced is difficult to *feel*. It is, frankly, hard to imagine a majority in America ever *wanting* to listen to evil, like Nazism, that will never offer anything productive. And if we all agree to unify around the idea of “tolerance,” it seems obvious that we would all unite in rejecting suppression of honest, unbigoted opinions. Of course, this assumes that we would recognize and agree upon what is dishonest and bigoted.

Similarly, it *seems* unlikely that the urge to help people who face social disadvantages can ever, realistically, be used as a tool to oppress a *majority*. The impulse is, after all, to help a powerless group to take a step forward, a step that cannot, conceivably, be large enough to truly threaten the livelihood of a powerful group. Leaving aside arguments about the validity of addressing the disparities between people based on racial groupings, affirmative action unquestionably contradicts the ideal of government neutrality. Any debate about affirmative action cannot refute this contradiction; it can only address whether it is a *worthwhile* one to make.

Because giving one person a job, for example, denies it to another, individual examples of people’s lives being damaged by these practices must be inherently dismissed in activists’ arguments and, therefore, do not count as evidence in discussion.

For this reason, opposing affirmative action, while logical and correct, has been a largely theoretical endeavor, without sufficiently compelling scenarios to resist the wave of emotionally charged proponents, who are now firmly entrenched in the participating institutions, such as universities.

To explain why policies that grant privileges to groups to compensate for inequalities are more than just “not fair,” we must understand that life and history occur in more than two dimensions. Forces do not push on society strictly according to political concepts of Left and Right. Policies toward “diversity” do not deal only with the relationship between white and black people. The next manifestation of evil will not be a resurgence of the same villains, and the next group to attempt to silence all other voices will understand that it must consider, and initially work around or within, ideals of multiculturalism.

### **Checks and Balances: Society’s Referee**

The danger is that devotion to cultural plurality will undermine other deliberate checks and balances in the American social system. For example, under the banners of “tolerance” and “multiculturalism,” on the basis of being inextricably linked to a *culture*, a *religion* is breaking U.S. restraints against the confluence of church and state. According to Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, “Islamists seek public financial support for Islamic schools, mosques, and other institutions. They also lobby for special quotas for Muslim immigrants, try to compel corporations to make special allowances for Muslim employees, and demand the formal inclusion of Muslims in affirmative-action plans.”

The impulse to do these things, of itself, does not reflect questionable intentions. It is reasonable for Muslims to want to spread their ideas. Most Christians want to do the same. True believers are not wrong to attempt to share what they believe to be spiritually crucial ideas and to ensure their own freedom to put them into practice. It is also true that religion informs

opinions on other issues, so a religious group is right to work against what it deems to be evil in society.

However, all groups involved in spreading beliefs of any kind — especially those believers in objectivity who are more concerned with social processes than with any particular ideology — should acknowledge the value of setting boundaries for the playing field of debate. That is what separation of church and state is about. It means that the state is not to become a tool for the promotion of a particular religion or, conversely, a tool for suppression of a particular religion.

If Islam comes to the field of ideas and, through discussion and merit, wins a majority, then it has acted according to the law of critical thought, upon which we all must agree if we hope to interact and live peaceably with each other, and deserves its majority status. However, given the current temper of America, combined with a very assertive strain of Islam that believes that full expression of the faith can only be achieved within an Islamic state, it is conceivable that the religion may skirt the public debate in a quest to directly impose religious practices in a civic capacity.

History has seen other organized religions taking the same approach, but most of the living followers of those religions have learned to think of government and religion as separate categories, each having to compromise for the sake of the other, to some degree, thus generating separation of power at a higher level of society. Ideological pushing around the edges of these categories is natural, good, and, moreover, productive, as long as human individuality is allowed to flourish (ensuring a balance of intentions and methodologies) and a general consensus about where the gray areas (or flexible lines) are exists.

In his essay, “The Danger Within: Militant Islam in America,” Daniel Pipes states that “precisely because the Constitution guarantees complete government neutrality toward religion, the system can be used to further Islamist aims.”<sup>1</sup> There is, in my opinion, nothing wrong with this fact, as long as that neutrality is maintained so that, when “Islamist aims” run contrary to those of

other groups, the same system will allow them to push back. In this way, a virtuous victor or compromise can emerge for each issue.

### **The Ref Picks a Side**

The problem that America currently faces in this regard is that the people who have taken the structures of society as their central concern have had mainly to contend, in their eyes, with the infringement of Christianity on their fanatically “objective” territory. The result has been an obvious and zealous suppression of Christianity in the public domain. When I first read Mr. Pipes’s essay, I wrote to him that I did not find it difficult, in the least, to envision a public school system trying to undermine Christian groups’ right to use its property while allowing Islamic groups the privilege.

My theory turned out to be an understatement of reality. Reports have begun to seep into the major news channels about California school districts teaching specific tenets of Islam to seventh graders, who are encouraged to participate in activities such as pretending to be “warriors fighting for Islam” (according to *The Washington Times*)<sup>2</sup> or staging “their own jihad via a dice game” (according to *WorldNetDaily*).<sup>3</sup> Intermediate-Excelsior School of Byron principal Nancy Castro claimed that the course at her school “is not religion, but ancient culture and history.” She also noted that the textbook, *Across the Centuries* (Houghton Mifflin), is used across the state of California.

For an illustration of what it means to teach the “culture and history” of a religious group but not the religion itself, consider “The Big Idea” synopsis of Chapter 10, Lesson 3, in Houghton Mifflin’s sixth-grade social studies textbook, *A Message of Ancient Days*:<sup>4</sup> “Today’s practice of Christianity and Judaism developed during Israel’s period of religious and political turmoil.” The first bulleted suggestion for teachers is to “Outline the story of Jesus’ role in the founding of Christianity, and place his teachings in the context of the Torah. Review what Jesus taught about the kingdom of God being at hand. Remind students

that his followers' belief that he was the messiah challenged the authorities." Under the heading "The Teachings of Jesus," the outline for the chapter makes a point of describing Jesus as a person who "was called the messiah," an admission that is directly followed by "opposition to him grew."<sup>5</sup>

I see no problem with educational materials in public schools addressing religious groups and figures only in the capacity that they acted in history. With students of various religious beliefs, if taxpayer-funded schools find that it makes the learning experience go more smoothly to put religious history in terms of leaders whose followers thought them to be religiously important, that's fine, especially among sixth and seventh graders. I do, however, find it a bit unnecessary to place such emphasis on the disbelief and opposition of "the authorities," whoever they were, and to consistently juxtapose religion and politics. And the suggestion that teachers "point out the ways in which [Constantine's] concerns about pleasing the Christian God mirrored earlier concerns about pleasing the Roman gods" in Chapter 15, Lesson 2, seems more than a little gratuitous.<sup>6</sup>

Disregarding the extras, such as the dice-game jihad, that teachers add to the textbook lessons, however, these slanted details might all be forgivable if the textbooks themselves treated all religions with equal skepticism. Here's the first "fact" in the "Lesson at a Glance Outline" for Grade 7, Chapter 3, Lesson 2, under the heading "The Life of the Prophet": "In A.D. 610, Muhammad had a vision of the angel Gabriel, in which he received messages from God."<sup>7</sup>

Statements that Muhammad had a direct line to God — while Jesus, amid the protests of "the authorities," merely "taught his followers" — cannot be justified by the suggestion that schools must compensate for Christianity's dominance outside of the classroom. Given the practiced distancing from Christianity in public institutions (and much of the modern media) as well as the diverse backgrounds of Americans, this point, which is a staple of the argument for "multicultural" studies, is not a presumption that the government can make. (Pop quiz: name all Ten Commandments. Extra credit if you get them in the proper order.)

A desire to ensure a balanced *amount* of knowledge still could not excuse blatantly tainted lessons about history. According to Houghton Mifflin’s state-sanctioned textbook, as Islam grew, “some people [who were apparently not ‘authorities’] in Mecca resented Muhammad, forcing him and his followers to migrate to Medina. Eight years later, Muhammad and his Muslim army marched to Mecca and the city surrendered.” This peaceful surrender is in marked contrast to the Crusades, about which the lesson outline later stresses that “some crusaders were only interested in killing Muslims and Jews and thieving.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Our Team Is Always Right**

With Islam being beneficially glossed in its *historical* context in public schools and Muslims seeking special dispensation for the outward manifestations of their beliefs, under the protections supposedly owed to *cultures*, it is not surprising that it is, as Pipes says, “difficult for anyone to criticize their religion or customs.” Society should not support suppression of or aggression toward a religion, but who defines what that means?

In its report, “The Status of Muslim Civil Rights in the United States, 2001: Accommodating Diversity,”<sup>9</sup> the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) characterizes the types of “Discrimination Incidents” that are reported to it. Of the 366 complaints in 2001, 37% concerned “Denial of religious accommodation.” Moreover, almost all of the categories are highly subjective, and many of the specific incidences involve objections to treatment that is not so obviously “unfair” or discriminatory — at the very least because it might apply to all religious groups.

I am not suggesting that discrimination does not create adverse circumstances for some, maybe many, Muslims. However, a soldier who is “disciplined” for disobeying orders by leaving his guard post to pray may just be paying the price of living in a “multicultural” society that is only held together by its secular practices. There are certain areas of public life in which religious citizens must compromise. If a soldier, for instance, does not

believe that God will understand a prayer missed for the sake of fulfilling his duties in a very structured environment that requires a high degree of devotion, then that soldier should not have enlisted. Even that degree of self-determination was not required in this specific case, however, because, while CAIR does not report the exact “discipline,” it was apparently not so extreme as to dissuade the soldier from maintaining his faithful obligation.

One other specific complaint proves the need for absolutely neutral government institutions. In a section called “Extremist Threats,” CAIR relates that “The Jewish Defense League *reportedly threatened* to kill a man and his daughter for painting anti-Jewish murals on the wall of his car wash business” (italics mine). The last sentence of CAIR’s summary, however, offers exactly the type of information that, in reverse, is not provided for any of the other complaints: “The [Muslim] man admitted to having anti-Israeli views, but believes he has a right to express them without fearing ethnic and religious intimidation.” The North Olmstead (IL) Police Department was investigating the complaint when it was reported to CAIR in October 2000, and I imagine that CAIR would have updated its official 2001 report to further define the anti-Islamic speech had anything come of the investigation. But I will withhold judgment on this count.

### **Neutrality Enables Trust**

In order for societal progress toward truth to be accomplished, we must not distrust others unless they give us reason to do so on an individual basis, and we must not fault others for seeking to share what they believe to be true. However, before we can put trust in this process — in our ability to trust — we must fortify the even-handed structures that make judgment a matter of conviction, not policy. Guaranteeing this neutrality and allowing all areas of life — religion, government, education, and so on — to contribute in their own capacity, even when they overlap or have flexible boundaries, must be key pieces to any strategy for ensuring a peaceful — and tolerant — future.

If we allow ourselves to be silenced now because others *feel* that our opinions are dishonest and bigoted, then the structure of our deliberate checks and balances will crumble. It will need to be recaptured and rebuilt, and more than sensibilities may be hurt in the process of returning to neutrality.

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## Parenthood: Making the World a Better Place

02/04/02

So now I have a daughter. Rather, now a baby girl has me for a father. My priorities must change. The drive to be the one to *point out* truth must dissipate and be replaced by a willingness to *act on* truth. The goal can no longer be to prove my worth, but to do something worthwhile.

So much of my life has been a game of abstraction and circular affectations. It is nice — safe — to have the world *out there*, to worry about the lies of the powerful as we do about a biased referee in sports, to nod at the chatter of celebrity swindlers as if the money that they shake out of our pockets is only Monopoly money after all. For my daughter's sake I must shout out to the world, "Open your eyes! This is not a game, not an abstraction, but life and facts." Arguments with which I once disagreed in theory I now must condemn with indignation. Acts that before I could not fathom I can now see for their wicked selfishness.

I wonder that others with children of their own could allow the world to be as it is. But, of course, having children only punctuates the phraseology that we already have for our lives. A greedy father will redouble his hoarding for the sake of his children and teach those children that they, too, must be greedy to get by in the world. A selfish mother will, at best, be selfish on her children's behalf or, at worst, be selfish at her children's expense.

I have been selfish in my world view, and I must cease to be so. I have imagined current events as I have imagined events in a novel — as if I can pick the story up for an hour in the evening

and leave it, rarely even carrying it into my dreams. I must wake up intellectually in exactly the way that I wake up to my daughter's cries for milk in the night — answering her needs with both awakenings. Those cries are not the traces of the world in my dreams; they are the consequence of my daughter's hunger. And the world, like hunger, will find her.

The world that is *out there* exists in my little New England town. The insanity can reach my daughter even here. There is no magic barrier between lying politicians and the income that feeds my daughter. Terrorists have proven that they do not respect our fantasy line between global conflict and daily lives. That is what September 11 showed: that the evening news is not a view into another dimension, but a window into our own world, merely a matter of proximity. The images that we see are really *out there* — those people really living and hating and breathing the same air that floats toward my daughter's lungs.

The world in which she will live will see confusion, dishonesty, selfishness, and fanatics of all stripes, including those who distract fanatically with their greedy pettiness. The monsters in the world are not only the bug-like men who sell teenagers on suicide. The selfishness is not only for money or attention. The dishonesty is also used to prop up faulty images of self worth — worthwhile words spoken for the sake of feelings and layered to hide the fact that the acts and plans themselves are worthless.

I will not allow my daughter to be a victim, nor will I allow her to be victimized. I will not allow men who would suppress women to demean my daughter. And I will battle those women who would suppress men; I will not allow “girl power” to drive a wedge between us. She is of her parents, and we of her. Our power derives from each other.

In doing all of this, I will seek to prove and to teach my daughter that we can engage the world without succumbing to it. The world is full of goodness and beauty. Of truth and blessings. Of happiness. Above all, I must not make my push against the

coldness in humanity out of fear and anger, those emotions that inspire only shallow, detached soliloquies, but out of confidence and love.

For confidence and love, I will shout to my human family even if it does not want to hear. I will struggle to make the power-blind see themselves for what they really are. I will invade the dreams of those who wish to lull themselves to sleep, and I will whisper to them that it is *better* to be awake. Only then can we see what is truly joyous in life.

For my daughter, I will accept — as a *gift* — the truth that my life is not for me alone.

## Choice Means Considering Benefits and Costs

02/11/02

Recently, on Fox News's O'Reilly Factor, Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt wouldn't answer the yes-or-no question, "Is a fetus an unborn baby?" Using a painfully common rhetorical strategy, Ms. Feldt refused to step outside of a microcosmic point to discuss the foundations that, ostensibly, make her position more than just arbitrary. The thoughtful reality is that actively ending a life is a grave decision, and society must insist that those who would make it be reminded at every turn of its magnitude to dissuade all but the most determined.

As with any decision, the benefits of avoiding unwanted or inadvisable parenthood come at a cost. As a general abstraction, "choice" is good. Ensuring that all children are wanted and loved is good. Reducing the number of people living in poverty is good. However, those who would take action toward any of these objectives lose the basis for their opinions if they forget why each of these statements is true: because *life* is valuable, and these are all steps toward making sure that *it* is good.

For pro-lifers, the "benefits" are, in most cases, unable to add up to parity with a life. Pro-abortionists see the removal of the benefits as the true cost in the equation, the cost of the life being negligible because only an uncomplicated, fully dependent organism is lost. While the former position may lead to very real distress in individual cases, the latter position is dangerous for society. Whatever the perceived benefits of public acceptance of abortion, to ignore or diminish the cost (by, for example, refusing to answer "yes" to an obvious question) is to continually lower the bar for adequate benefits.

It is most productive to phrase an issue in terms of what we seek to gain and then measure the costs of each possible solution. In the context of abortion, this means that the onus is on a pregnant woman to make clear what she hopes to gain at the expense of an entirely unique human life, be it preservation of her own life or the ability to wear a bikini on vacation. The spurious exaltation of “choice” demands, instead, that the costs be proven sufficiently high to justify removal of a “right,” thus inherently demanding that a particular form of life *be shown* to have value. It is inescapable that, in beginning with this idea, society diminishes the value of human life in general.

The argument that the value of each form of human life must be proven presents no mechanism for stopping the corrosion of life’s worth. If a human being who lacks fingers, a heart, and self-awareness is not enough of a “person” to justify protection, which attributes would add that value? Is the child’s theoretical ability to exist independently of the mother sufficient reason to disrupt the mother’s college career? Or does the fact that a baby is *only* a “potential” self-aware individual exonerate a mother who kills him or her immediately after birth?

While a major push of pro-abortionists is to remove the stigma of abortion, the view that must be taken of life to support that push slides, as a matter of logic, to repugnant acts such as infanticide. True, had Melissa Drexler, the 18-year-old mother who murdered her son immediately after birth at her prom in 1997 (she’s now been released from prison), been able to secretly obtain a guilt-free, late-term abortion, she wouldn’t have had to wait until her son was born to murder him. However, this isn’t a statement that is set aside as purely a theory in some punditry handbook; it is a concept that Drexler, herself, may have considered. With the law condoning abortion, the stage is set for a pregnant woman to see the line between abortion and murder as a blurry abstraction. Drexler understood that, quibble as we might, the only morally substantive difference between an unborn child, at any pre-birth stage, and a “person” is that the child may not be aware of what is going on in a conscious, self-

aware way. Killing the baby comes to be seen as an ultra-late-term abortion, especially to a teenager who looks to society to discover what is right and wrong.

It is a forever-expanding thesis that, if abortion were easier and stigma-free, then all of the problems related to it, such as Melissa Drexler's infanticide or merely post-abortion depression, would evaporate. This logic is of a kind with the suggestion that we can't stop the poor from procreating, so we must decrease poverty by forcibly decreasing the number of poor. In a mild form, this amounts to subsidized birth control; in an extreme form, it amounts to on-demand, or even compulsory, abortion. This strategy, beyond reeking of genocide, *encourages* the behavior that leads to the problem, and new pregnancies will likely always equal or surpass our capacity to abort them. We stop the cycle of procreation and poverty by forcing poor or juvenile parents to own up to what they've done. The emphasis should be on encouraging women and men either to curb their reckless sexual behavior or to become responsible enough to support any children who are born.

It is flippant to suggest that "potential" mothers and fathers wouldn't gain something far more valuable than the ease of childless life by being forced to learn responsibility. The broader implication of removing emphasis on responsibility is that people don't ever have to, or even can't, be responsible individuals — consider defense of John Walker. Conversely, learning to accept and handle responsibility is a crucial component to lifting one's self out of poverty. Without some degree of self-control and determination, all of the government handouts that could possibly be wrung out of taxpayers won't provide lasting relief. Mass provision of abortion won't teach poor men and women to change a way of generally handling themselves that keeps them from any and all possible advancement.

The longer abortion exists in a stigma-free environment, the more bastard children will be born into poverty and the more babies will be murdered. Perhaps society will never reach consensus about who should decide what maternal prerogatives

outweigh incipient life. But in truth, the general public can never entirely remove individuals' ability to choose abortion, just as it cannot remove individuals' ability to choose cocaine; it can only shift the context of the decision. Ideally, the government will cease to officially condone abortion except in extreme cases. With or without a change in government policy, society must shed its immature dread of stigma — a valid mechanism for making an understanding of the gravity of a decision part of the choice.

## Better than Varsity: Will Adversity Ensure Diversity at the University?

02/18/02

In the interest of diversity, the University of California is going to give extra weight to applicants who can show that they have overcome adversity. The language of the initiative is admirable enough, and proponents would likely insist that they are merely placing value on variety of “experience.”<sup>1</sup>

But student government groups cite “diversity” and “affirmative action” as reasons for their support of the initiative.<sup>2</sup> And groups such as By Any Means Necessary (BAMN) have clearly advocated for the initiative as form of affirmative action.<sup>3</sup> And official debate within the University’s administrative structure described the issue using language such as “the broad diversity of backgrounds characteristic of California” and considered that it may “subject the University to litigation.”<sup>4</sup> In short, the “Comprehensive Review” initiative is meant as an answer to the people of California’s Proposition 209, which bans discriminatory affirmative action. The “experience” about which the university’s president, board of regents, and academic senate are talking refers to demographic, rather than intellectual or ideological, diversity.

For the sake of harmonious discussion, however, let’s assume that “[f]aculty on individual campuses” are not being “given flexibility to create admission policies and practices” that consider “context of opportunities and challenges” and “personal experience and backgrounds” with the express intention that they practice affirmative action. In other words, let’s assume that the University of California isn’t bent on breaking a law created

by the population that owns the school. Is adversity — “the context of personal experience” — a valuable criterion for judging an applicant’s past academic achievement and potential for the future?

On its face, the idea, although it tries to quantify the unquantifiable, isn’t bad. I do believe that a variety of lessons can be learned from facing adversity — some valuable, some harmful. “I’ve got to take responsibility for myself” versus “I’ve got to stick it to the world before it sticks it to me.” However, rough circumstances do not ensure that one will take away *the right* lesson, and that lesson can be learned equally well without the benefit of suffering (although insufferable people might consider the suffering method to be preferable).

The important basis for judgment is an examination of how adversity affected the subsequent behavior of the individual in question. Consider two applicants to the University of California. One hands in an essay about having to evade drug dealers to reach the library; the other looks to have led an ordinary — not necessarily privileged, but certainly not adverse — childhood. If their applications are otherwise, more or less, identical, perhaps an admissions board could convincingly argue that adversity made the former’s accomplishments more poignant. But if the ordinary kid significantly outperforms the other, the adversity shifts from being an added accomplishment to being an excuse for inferior performance.

My deeper objection to the core idea is that the “ordinary kid” may very well have faced far more “adversity.” Perhaps his studying was done in the basement while hiding from an abusive, drunken father — a fact, first, that he doesn’t believe a college admissions board to have any right to know and, second, that he would rather move beyond as he moves out of his father’s direct reach and thus, by getting into college, truly overcomes the adversity by not letting it affect his life, even to the extent that it helps him.

A person who feels the need to benefit from and/or continually refer to adversity hasn’t overcome it. Moreover, if a

university, government, or society overcomes it for him, then he hasn't gained the benefit of those lessons that adversity can teach. The primary quality of adversity that makes its survivors better people is that it can force them to stand and grapple with difficulty.

The idea that adversity, itself, bequeaths an authentic merit is part of the pervasive ideology of victimhood that was recently displayed so embarrassingly by United States Senator Robert Byrd (D., WV) and United States Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill when they argued about whose outhouse had been colder when they were young. In a sense, both men have obviously overcome the obstacles of their humble upbringings, as evidenced by their wealth and positions. In another, more personal sense, the fact that they can get so worked up about the topic so many years later shows that they still have much overcoming to do. But they do raise an interesting question: Which of these men would get in to the University of California?

With reference to a college literature class during which the professor explained to the students that my having to unload fishing boats on the freezing winter weekends was actually a privilege, I'd say neither. To the collegiate left, everything in the lives of white male non-professors is a privilege. Credit for adversity is only for — and is inherently held by — people who can claim the coveted status of minority.

Which leads us back to the reality that the University of California's entire exercise is really all about tenured professors and spoiled academic administrators continuing affirmative action despite the wisdom — and legal demands — of the workaday, adversity-facing people of California.

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## Balance and Capitalists' Sportsmanship

02/25/02

Clear thoughts are often delayed. It seems that inspiration always comes as the phone is laid on the hook or as the car turns the corner out of sight (or as the talk show host presses "Disconnect"). Such was the case after a long, rambling (although connected) conversation that I recently had with a good friend of mine, after which I thought out loud: Put concisely, capitalism is a way to make it in somebody's best interest to do good.

I'm sure that this sentiment has been stated before, though I've never heard it phrased in this way. I've certainly never read a pithy analysis of capitalism that put the emphasis on that last word, "good," as if capitalism were a charitable process. But this is a problem with our modern perspective, not with the capitalistic system. Capitalists work to provide something that society wants; they are not acting according to a law of nature, but to a neutral game plan.

Some haters of capitalism believe that the system inevitably caters to the greedy, misanthropic seller who appeals to consumers' most vile, uncontrollable, primal instincts. Business people who love capital for its own sake seem to bear this theory out. However, it doesn't follow, from either group's perspective, that demand — broad willingness to trade money — is evidence that a product is "good," just as a maneuver that yields high scores in sports is not necessarily sportsmanly. In fact, it may ultimately diminish the appeal of the game.

In sports, the points elevate excitement and motivate the players. However, whether or not a particular fan's team wins, the highest score possible in the given amount of time amounts to nothing without an outcome — a victory and a loss. Therefore, not only does it not enhance a game to remove too many obstacles to scoring (especially in a lopsided fashion), but it also proves that everybody involved has forgotten why the game is being played.

Since the outcome is a consequence of the score, however, the drive to gain points will always put players and coaches in a position from which they can easily lose sight of the true import of their actions. Additionally, even the most structured sport produces moments in which the inherently biased teams cannot judge an important event well. The referee takes his crucial position to ensure that the rules of the game are followed and that the intended parameters for scoring aren't bent at the expense of enjoyment (the value) and to prevent the audience's demand for excitement from ultimately harming the players. In a similar fashion, the government, as society's referee, keeps an eye on the rules of capitalism so that the impetus to amass money doesn't infringe on the abstract good for which the game was created. A ref should not influence the outcome of a game; he should only judge whether it is being played by rules that others have instructed him to preserve. In his official capacity, he should also not sit in judgment of the fans and rule-makers.

Nothing in this entire metaphor should dictate what "good," whether it be entertainment or pharmaceutical innovation, is to be sought. That determination must be kept out of reach of those who have a direct influence on the game itself and be subject to the influence of other parts of human life and society. This is the area that has slipped to a frightening tilt in modern times.

Science can help us to improve the game within the rules, although all innovations must be reviewed thoroughly before being thrust upon the field. Art, life's commentator, can help us to understand how all of the forces that act within, upon, and around the game relate to the greater good. Religion should

remind us that there is a reality outside of the arena — that the score, even victory, isn't the ultimate goal of the game.

Perhaps part of modern society's difficulty in seeing the naturalness of capitalism and the difference between the ends and the means is the distance of the actual trading from tangible products and services. Bartering was less abstract: if I want a candle to enable me to read at night, I can trade my own work with a candle maker. Money is more efficient *because* it is a step removed, but it is still physical, and a worker can see her pay result from labor and then enable a purchase. Credit and debit cards, automatic deposit, and other modern financial methods make it all too easy to lose sight of the purpose behind the earning.

Another danger in recent decades has been the ruling class's love affair with socialism. For an assumed "greater good," they would simultaneously place judgment of all of society in the hands of their referees and attack the validity of those external structures that help us to understand what is good. With the referees distracting the audience with stump speeches and commentators making the rules — even *the score itself* — look arbitrary, the players are free to stand before the net and rack up point after point.

Capitalism *is* a powerful strategy that *can* change the world irrevocably in what seems like mere moments. Democracy is necessary for the audience to exert influence on the people on the field. If the audience can neither leave the stadium nor refuse to buy a ticket, the game itself has become the only purpose, and a hollow charade at that.

Democracy, even of the representative type, is also absolutely crucial to ensure that all of the equally important forces, structures, and perspectives in society can influence the feelings and actions of both the audience and the players. And we need all of the forces in society to play their role in relation to each other in a long, rambling (although connected) public conversation through which to think things through and find pithy clarity about the value of the game.

## Confidence in the Arts

03/04/02

One of the most dangerous trends of the past half-century has been the schism of the arts into either superficial mass-consumables or indecipherable highbrow nonsense. Didactic art that falls somewhere in-between, while certainly being created, has neither the broad appeal to attract the investments of capitalists nor the rote message to gain the support of the predominantly Left-leaning art-world establishment. Whether taken literally or figuratively, such a confluence of circumstances seems to constitute a deliberately corrupting force. The influence of this force — even if seen as chance and circumstance — is difficult to express in theoretical or practical terms because it is so complexly intertwined with the structure of society that it must be felt rather than reasoned.

A case in point: it is difficult to describe the danger in socialism, and its purported benefits can be deceptively attractive enough to induce willful naiveté. Similarly, because it deals in morally superficial wealth, capitalism can be difficult to phrase in terms of the good that it creates in the world. By blending them into a story, however, an author can give these social theories workable context and, thereby, make even those with different views understand. Herman Melville treated these very points with a concision that is astonishing in its completeness in his 1857 novel *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade*.<sup>1</sup>

The plot of the novel centers around the Devil taking an April 1st steamboat up the Mississippi as a con man (i.e., confidence man), preying, as those crooks do, on the trust and charitable

dispositions of his fellow passengers. As the con man interacts with the diverse people on the boat, Melville weaves philosophical themes into the conversations and the deception.

Early in the book, the con man, in the guise of a charity collector, approaches a man who might fit today's characterization of a "limousine liberal." His clothes are so extravagant that they are lined, on the inside, with expensive satin. His hands, no less than his gloves, are a spotless white that is made possible by a "negro body servant, whose hands nature had dyed black," who relieves him of the need to touch anything on the dirty steamboat (30). Even the money that he donates to the Devil's faux cause has "been kept unspotted from the world," without having suffered the wear of bills that have acted in the world and been earned (31).

To this man of the "gold sleeve-buttons," the Devil relates a charitable idea that he concocted while at the 1851 World's Fair in London, where he had been exhibiting an easy-chair that, like relative morality, was "so elastic, springy, and docile" that even the most tormented body, like "the most tormented conscience," might "find rest." The idea was a "World's Charity," a combination of all philanthropic causes into an organization that would "be empowered by the various governments to levy, annually, one grand benevolence tax upon all mankind." (33). Through this tax of one dollar per person per year, the Devil projects that the world's ills would be expurgated within fourteen years.

The Devil realizes that pure communism, as espoused by Charles Fourier, is "an impossible scheme" (34). Therefore, the World's Charity, in the "Wall Street spirit," would "let out on contract" its charitable work (35). Thus, having consolidated — and mandated — global "donations," the World's Charity would bring to bear "the Archimedean money-power" by encouraging competition among subcontractors and acting as an administrator. The punch line of the chapter comes when the Devil states, "I have nominated myself provisional treasurer" (36).

The word "provisional," like the promise of "dissolution of the society" when the world's problems have been solved (34),

points to the lesson of the chapter. *All* of the world's problems will never be solved. As with supposedly "temporary" state taxes in modern America, when the particular project at hand is completed, another "useful" purpose is certain to be found for the money because one of *the most* useful purposes, to administrators, is their salaries.

Nonetheless, the Devil's plan isn't immediately dismissable as a bad idea. The good of solving the world's problems is certainly worth the suggested per-person cost, especially if that is the extent of each person's necessary annual charitable donations. More importantly, since capitalism has proven to be the most effective system for progress, it *is* advisable that "the example of worldly policy in worldly projects should not by spiritual projectors be slighted." (35).

It is the socialist element of the project, funneling all "donations" through one organization, that presents the danger. Once it is ensconced as a mandatory tax, refusal to make the annual donation would be a criminal offense, thus increasing the difficulty of reforming the system if corrupted. And, given the sheer amount of money that would be involved, corruption would be inevitable.

The wisdom of consolidation in any area of life depends hugely on the extent to which we trust the person or organization in which we vest responsibility. As a theoretical matter, it is best to spread power and influence as broadly as possible so those with ill-intentions — the Devil, say, or even a run-of-the-mill con man or politician — cannot position themselves at the hub of too much of it. For practical reasons (indeed, for reasons of reality), this ideal is not always possible. The difficulty lies in determining the best compromise.

Balancing the theoretical and the realistic, the ideal and the practical, involves a tremendous degree of instinct. This truth is captured even in common phrases such as "the art of negotiation." Societies, too, must act according to a group instinct at times. The fostering of this instinct can be enabled by arts that distill complicated interactions into a manageable

context. Even if it is impossible to explain why the mechanisms of real-world parallels to the Devil's plan in *The Confidence Man* are dangerous, understanding the implications of the Devil being treasurer in the fiction can give us a context through which to understand reminiscent situations in life. By, in essence, leading readers to learn lessons for themselves, fiction can even effect changes in readers' core beliefs, something that is nearly hopeless in debate.

Given the complexity of worldly circumstances, logical points are feeble barriers in the face of ideology. As the Devil states, "no philanthropist likes to be opposed with quibbling" over practical details (34). Little wonder he would work to diminish the influence of artists who would make the world clear.

1. Melville, Herman, *The Confidence Man: His Masquerade* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1971)

## A Ramble

03/11/02

Saturday morning, a fog rolled over the bay in time to paint the sunrise in pastels, but it dissipated into brisk reality before people with no dogs to walk nor weekend jobs to work nor problems sleeping were out to see it. And, as if the fog were the perfume-mist of spring, the air was thick with scents. An earthy brown, and the green smell of evergreen bushes — not those with the soft needles that I used to pluck while wandering around town looking for playmates in the summertime, but those with knotted fingers, pungent and spiked and painful to a boy's uncalled fingertips.

The kind I plucked and felt two years ago outside an office building while walking off my “breakdown,” which was not really one of nerves, but of patience. Until that spring, my first out of college, the change of season always brought a change of life... a new routine, new surroundings. Even selling fish from a truck and cleaning the fishy boxes on a mountainside for years between bouts of higher education, the spring and summer brought freedom from the pain of working outside in the winter. Jobs of that sort do, indeed, bring a change of life with each season because the seasons dictate so much of the day's experience. But even the winter and melting inches of ice from my raincoat's zipper with hot water from the sink so I could let my skin breathe while I ate lunch — huge, hot, manly, sloppy sandwiches — brought uniqueness and variety and improvisation.

Last spring, half out of the office but still collared white, I worried that the sad feeling wrought by rote experience would

return. It didn't... not in a big way, at least. My pessimism had been tempered by hope and the lazy days of a water view as I passed from my office/bedroom to my kitchen for supermarket deli ham and swiss or slices of cucumber. My separation from all things natural by cubicle walls had been torn apart by the teeth and kisses of a puppy. And our walks brought the smell of salt water and fresh-cut grass.

This spring, which I hereby declare to have begun with that rolling fog and the open window on the way to buy diapers, I am optimistic... about everything. The processes of grown-up life, strategies other than simply dreaming things to be true, that I could not picture in the fall are taking shape amidst the haze of my activity. I'm optimistic, although I'm not sure why — probably because the trust that comes with *not* knowing why *but* being sure bears optimism. The fruits of faith: confidence that there *is* a purpose raises my view above the fragile mesh of processes.

I still work too much and succeed too little. I still write too much, with too little published. My work I have taken into my own hands, forging my own way, building my own business, taking ideas that I think have value and convincing others that they really do. My writing I have buttressed with the companionship of other writers. And we have decided to publish ourselves.

We cannot escape the processes. We must fund our publication. The writers ask me who will trade their money for advertising space. Some suggest we ask the government for grants. And these insistences make a Monet blur of life, in which an idea, as much as it somehow resembles reality — as much as it may seem possible — is not reality and never could be. Because the subtle strokes of fate cannot be planned, and how can I sell what is only worth buying for interpretation.

And grants are not for the likes of me. I am too white, too male, and too conservative in my beliefs. Harvard and Brown and Boston University taught me that lesson well when they taught me that support of Huckleberry Finn — the character no less than the book — in a writing sample was error enough to undo years of nearly flawless academic work. But Huckleberry Finn

has been in me since long before I heard anybody explain why Jim was worse than a friend or why Huck was wicked for treating him as no more than one (and I had wanted a friend like Jim when I was young, when I saw an outdoor theatrical version of the book, sitting in a grassy enclave among trees and smelling the green of soft grass and hearing the actor say “doan’ look at his face — it’s too gashly,” because even then I knew that the dead man in the floating house was Pap). And I believe in what I believe Mr. Twain believed.

And I believe that ours is a great, and greatly, artistic periodical — and a great business model, too, because the two are not exclusive. Art should not need charity to survive, and clarity should not be seen as base. The space will sell. But others want to know how, who, where before I can say myself. That will come. There is a way.

The shop owners will see it in our eyes, in the clarity and confidence. Sometimes the more you go out into the fog, the more it lifts. And it may lift slowly, but we who’ve tossed our sleepless night for better mornings are better for having seen it.

## Meetings on the Road, I:<sup>1</sup> Charitable Intentions

03/18/02

When, in the heart of Winter's fiercest chill,  
my oil heater burned its reserves through,  
I cheered to have a fireplace to fill.  
(Suburban "Greens" had yet to plug my flue.)

To not defy environmental law,  
I sought to cull my stock along the road,  
where such a specimen of wood I saw,  
no frost would reach the bones of my abode.

As if from air, a man appeared, to take  
the stick, with which my skull he sore abused.  
"You selfish fool! For comfort you'd forsake  
philanthropy for which this might be used!"

With all the boons he listed while he whacked,  
I warned to be so humanely attacked.

1. From time to time, henceforth, the Just Thinking column will feature poems from a series of parable sonnets called "Meetings on the Road." These offerings will be infrequent, so if you enjoy them — to ponder or simply to bob your head with the iambic rhythm — consider them rare gems that justify your bearing with the tedium of my usual opinion writing, and if you dislike them, remind yourself that you will only face their reading on rare Mondays.

## The Husband Did It

03/25/02

Almost every talk-radio caller and letter-to-the-editor writer whom I have heard call for Russell Yates to bear some legal responsibility for the deaths of his children has really been implying that it was mostly his fault. One even went so far, after a long list of horrible — Satanesque — things that he had done, as to state that “Andrea struck back at him the only way that she knew how: by killing his kids.”

Come to think of it, maybe Andrea Yates has grounds to request that her conviction be overturned on the basis that her lawyers emphasized her insanity rather than the fact that her husband had made her so. The my-husband-made-me-do-it defense is much more apt to elicit sympathy from a modern jury than is the Satan-made-me-do-it defense on which she hung her hopes.

One problem with the insanity plea is that lawyers must make an abstract “illness” sufficiently tangible to shift focus from the accused. We can counter that society must broadly proclaim that people whose insanity may cause them to do something illegal must muster the wherewithal to “seek help.” This is similar, in implication, to drunk drivers mustering the wherewithal to take a cab. Moreover, when there isn’t a specific, external cause of the insanity (like a reaction to some strange chemical in the air), common sense suggests that a criminally insane person must be securely separated from society. And this separation must be beyond the liberating reach of psychiatrists who prescribe pills to balance criminals into a conditional sanity. If a mother cannot

be trusted to stop having children before she reaches the point at which killing them becomes an option, how can she be trusted to take a pill? A murderer has murdered, insane or not.

“Of course, she’s insane!” I’ve heard “legal experts” proclaim on television. “Look what she did!” Lawyers seem to believe that our legal system is such that a coherent (according to the dubious *legal* standards for coherency) argument can be made that the crime itself is evidence that a vile murderer cannot be convicted of the crime. I think the general public, however, has reached the point at which we are no longer willing to accept the deadly combination of legalistic and psychiatric mumbo-jumbo.

Everybody who deliberately commits a violent crime is, by definition, crazy to some degree. The question is the dangerously subjective one of whether we can find something in that craziness that diverts blame from the criminal. As an emotional self-test, imagine that *Mr. Yates* had killed the children. Now imagine a man calling in to a talk radio show and declaring that Andrea bore responsibility because she drove him to it. What’s your reaction?

I believe that statement would result in a call-board-lighting backlash. I suspect that Andrea would be considered even more of a victim if she “stood by her man” in the same fashion that Russ has stood by his wife. His public statements, were they hers, would be considered to represent the archetype of “the victim mentality.”

Compassion must be weighed. Salvaging as much of an individual’s God-given life as possible should be an underlying goal. Some people are unsalvageable because they refuse to consider what it is that they’ve done to deserve their fate. Worse, some people are denied the opportunity for reconciliation *with themselves* because the legal system hides them away in a narcotic and philosophical fog in which the sharp edge of responsibility is blunted. And there they stay until they figure out the right combination of Rorschach-test answers or do their time and are allowed to live out their lives. They are by no means

rehabilitated, although perhaps deadened to reality... and that only until they convince themselves to stop taking the dope, or just forget to do so.

As with everything, there is a balance. Criminals are not rehabilitated without facing the fact that they have — no matter how many excuses they can make — done something wrong. Yet, our nation's sense of responsibility has been undermined by an extension of the idea that we must never blame the victim: we must never “blame” ourselves because we can always find some reason that we were merely responding, victim-like, to someone or -thing else. For our society to ever turn the corner toward real understanding and secure lives, we *must* take responsibility for our own actions, even as we are realistic and honest about what is not our responsibility.

So we must be realistic about the blame that we can lay on Russell Yates, even as we acknowledge that he bears some responsibility and has acted in an absolutely despicable manner since his tribulations became fame-garnering. He and all those television lawyers who have argued that a particularly disturbing murder is *prima facie* evidence of a sick (really meaning “unindictable”) murderer should, themselves, be rounded up and placed in a nice, comfy funny farm.

That won't happen in our present world, though, because the should-be inmates are too well entrenched in our controlling social structures. There's a cliché here in which I won't indulge. Let's take it case by case. Here's what we do with Russell Yates: make him pay for Andrea's incarceration. That's enough to send anybody into a financial purgatory — everybody, that is, except the broad, faceless American society, who has been asked not only to accept blame for many personal crimes and sicknesses, but also to bear the financial burden of circular treatments as well as circular legal logic.

## April Angels Day

04/01/02

At first, I thought it a misfortune that my column falls on April 1st, April Fools Day, this week. The ideological world in which I incubated for nearly a decade sought, as it seemed, to make *every day* April Fools Day by skeptically finding shady subtexts in all things. Therefore, my reflexive thought was to write an ironic, untrustworthy piece in homage to the day.

But I don't feel like doing that. With Easter just passed and Lent just finished, I'm in a more hopeful mood. So, rather than cynicism, I thought I'd write about belief. Rather than defer to a holiday with the basic theme that, on it, you must be suspicious of those in whom you usually place the most trust, I thought I'd pay tribute to the season's message of trust. With the intangible anticipation of new life in the air — a bursting forth of which we don't yet see proof but can feel and know is proximate — I thought I'd write about angels.

Yes, although it may erase the last hints of my name in the big book of intellectuals (all the bigger for the fact that so few in it give evidence of intelligence), I will state that I do, in fact, believe in angels. I believe that angels are the manifestations of God's activity in this world. I believe that, when a loose screw miraculously holds a wing on a plane until the passengers are safely on the ground, it is — literally *and* figuratively — an angel who holds it.

I must be clear, though. I don't believe in *Touched by an Angel* angels. Until one materializes before me to tell me I'm wrong (and that *is* a dare), I don't believe that angels are

independently acting beings. They haven't the free will to be so because, in essence, they are "will" made tangible. Angels aren't ambassadors who may use their own judgment and who merely *try* to act according to God's plan. They are "sent" by God to do His work only in the sense that an arrow is sent by an archer to hit a target.

The image that I have of an angel is not as a glowing red-haired woman seeking her own path in God's reality, requiring guidance from more-experienced angels to ensure that she succeeds in following His will. That search — or lack of complete confidence — is what separates humans from angels, and the experience of it is the exclusive treasure of humanity — God's gift to us. It is only through doubt and, in turn, the ability to wonder and question that we gain the freedom of choice and the ownership of independent "wills."

Except for the occasional invisibility and luminescence, we humans are capable of taking exactly the roles of the angels on television — indeed, that is the point. In real life, people — appearing "out of nowhere" or not — who help others are acting in the same way as angels. And we are no less "close" to God because we have doubts and they do not. In fact, when we succeed in doing God's work, we raise ourselves above the level of angels because our action is a choice and, therefore, a return gift to God.

For all of the beauty and valuable lessons and practices to be found in the teachings of Eastern religions, this is the point at which that spiritual path doubles back on itself. Our search for God must lead inward, yes, and we will find His presence there, but finding it does not represent a full connection to Him. Eastern religions' concentration on closeness to God is well worth studying and pursuing to an extent. Although it would be foolhardy to do more than speculate about capital-"P" Purpose, I do feel that *a* purpose of reality is for us to return to God — to seek that bond. But true closeness to the divine cannot be found in a cave. God did not create us to be yo-yos, sent down into the world only to return along our own strings. Finding "Oneness"

with God — before death — does not represent spiritual success; why would such a person continue to exist in this world if it did?

God created an *active, physical* world so that we might act within it. Angels, only, have the ability to sift from our reality to the inexplicable reality of presence with God. But they gain that ability at the cost of individual expression. We are, from a point of view, cursed by the persistence of our doubts and our sins even when we try to act according to God's will — even when we succeed. The only thing of which we can be absolutely sure is that we've tried. We act in confluence with God's will by looking for acts that we might be in a particular place or position *for the purpose* of doing.

On April Fools Day, we might find, when sipping morning coffee, that — somehow — sugar has turned to salt. With the activity of angels, we can only know that — somehow — sand has yielded to life. But when we live the lives that we have been given — when we enjoy this active, physical reality — doing our best to respond to the wind of God's will as it wears away the stone of distrust, well, then...

# On Sight, Out of Mind

04/08/02

**A**t one point in the careers of Tweety and Sylvester, a dog entered into the picture. The dog, as I recall, took it upon himself to protect Tweety, and so the perennial war between dogs and cats took as its immediate justification a battle over a bird. Part of Sylvester's strategy was to frame the dog for offenses that would lead to his being ejected from the house when their owner's tapping foot signaled a cease-fire. Of course, the owner fell for the deception every time... until she caught Sylvester yellow-tongued, so to speak.

The aspect of the story that I'd like to bring out — comprehending a situation on sight — is a common enough theme. Somewhere in movies, television, books, or real life, everybody can identify a case in which an authority figure, entering into a scene midway, misapplied blame. And it is true that such necessarily immediate assessments are a tricky business, requiring split-second comparisons of histories, body language, witnesses, and other information. In some cases, the authority figure seeks to avoid the decision, applying punishment equally, but this, when one party is almost entirely innocent or when the other party is well served in its dangerous ambitions by false equivalency, is hardly just at all.

I consider the cartoon, which obviously made an impression on me as a child, to be a tool for distillation in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is commonly described as “very complicated.” In my view, while the particulars might be complicated — indeed, purposefully made so in many cases —

the overall conundrum is very simple. The complication arises from people, arguing either side, taking brief snapshots of history that make their claims seem more genuine. Muddying the waters further, different sources frequently make completely opposite and contradictory statements of fact. Somebody is not being entirely truthful, and if we are to act, we must discern whose claims are most trustworthy.

The ease of judging the situation can be found when looking at the *current* reality and honestly considering routes toward bringing the conflict to an end. If the object is to speed to an event that lies in the future, the past is almost inconsequential, except for modeling what *not* to do. We must assess where the pieces lie now. A principle that is of glaringly obvious utility in understanding conservative versus liberal battles in domestic politics is instructive in this area as well: even with minimal knowledge about the history of a situation, there are certain observable factors that convey the beliefs and intentions of both parties, including the ways in which they interact with each other, how they construct their arguments, and how they conduct their own internal relations.

A picture in the *New York Post* a few months ago, featuring Palestinian children in the full garb of suicide bombers, provides such a factor: training children — who represent the future in all ways — to be martyrs is not an action that a group takes if it has any intention of even beginning to abate ill will now or well into the future. On the other hand, restraining a far superior military and offering concessions — any concessions, when compared to the intransigent Arafat — suggest that Israel, whatever the history, actually wants peace and does not, as a political entity, despise the Palestinians.

At this point in time, those who are neither anti-Semitic nor hoping to profit from continued violence must make it clear to the Palestinians, in no uncertain terms, that compromise is incumbent upon them. They must be made to choose — *now*, before more children are taught to make bombs of themselves — between compromise and the loss of all chances to have their own nation for at least a full generation.

But *our* nation, which occasionally acts as a mediator (capitalistically put, as a “broker for peace”), lacks the certainty to make such determined statements. In part, our inability to do so results from a lack of training in looking at situations with relatively little background information, which leaves us, in turn, particularly susceptible to propaganda. The joint influences of relativism and specialization have eroded the belief in “common sense” from our culture.

When compared with the emotional and financial fruits of a blend of multiculturalist ideals and career-specific training, what use is general intelligence or the ability think beyond our specialization? The answer is available by example: the box — or myriad, too-diverse boxes — into which America has been putting its own children and young adults is only a milder version of the one that is enabling so many Palestinian boys and girls to consider “human bomb” as a viable career path. Ask John Walker.

It may be the case that many people around the world would be unable to assign modern nationalities metaphorically to the parable of the dog, cat, bird, and owner with which this column began. Such tools of simplification are crucial for preparing children for the decisions they will face as adults; it is also crucial — if we are to act in the world — that adults be able to reduce complicated situations to seemingly trite synopses. However, just as dangerous — if not more so — is the possibility that even more people around the world, having decided who ought best be represented by each cartoon character, would be unable to express the limitations of that scenario if the situation were to require a broader view.

## A Love-Lit Shelter Sets Me Free

04/15/02

I carry keys of hope with me  
when I adventure in the wild.  
A love-lit shelter sets me free.

We'd unlock new prosperity  
if from our vaults trust were unpiled.  
I carry keys of hope with me.

I've bellowed creativity,  
though mocking hecklers smirking smiled.  
A love-lit shelter sets me free.

No hatred-filled society  
has chained me, nor my faith defiled.  
I carry keys of hope with me.

The peace of my security  
need never turn my lifetime mild.  
A love-lit shelter sets me free.

And what a precious gift a key  
to love, when passed on to a child.  
I carry keys of hope with me.  
A love-lit shelter sets me free.

## A Bright Future for Revolution, Part 1

04/22/02

As it happened, on the very day that I settled on a studio in which to record my first professional CD, I finally got around to reading an article that my mother had sent me several weeks earlier. The article, by Warren St. John, from the March 3 *New York Times*, is about “the vanity CD[, which] has become the cultural equivalent of the novel in the dresser drawer.”<sup>1</sup>

As someone who has self-published a novel and intends to self-finance a CD, this sentiment seems doubly disparaging to me. Mr. St. John suggests that such self-doers as myself “walk the line between hope and delusion.” Steve Rosenthal, a studio owner interviewed for the article, proclaims that “the threshold of talent for making a CD is very low”; another owner, Will Schillinger, confides that it is “‘sheer torture’ to listen to some would-be artists.” These statements suggest that I am, at best, in poor company.

Of course, as anybody with even an idle interest in modern arts and entertainment will concede, all of these statements hold true for many of those “stars” who found success through the accepted channels, as well. Even the most talented young musicians are deluding themselves if they believe that success is assured; in every critic’s opinion, there are dozens of celebrities who have a decided lack of talent; and every person who has ever turned the radio dial or come across MTV has found some “artists” who would be “sheer torture” to listen to for hours on end.

For these reasons, I believe that Mr. St. John's statement that "the odds of commercial success have rarely been longer" is a half-truth. He is referring to the flooded market, into which even just "the major labels released more than 6,400 albums last year." However, while — with so many more CDs available — the odds are certainly less promising for any given *album* on the record store shelf, the odds for any given *artist* probably haven't changed much. The difference is that the musicians are one step closer to direct competition with each other, and their success is less dependent on the seemingly arbitrary whims of record executives.

And that is the record industry's real complaint and why it is so eager to libel independent newcomers' activities as "vanity" projects. As a matter of logic, the fact of "the threshold of talent" being lower does not mean that everybody who jumps it is therefore undeserving of recognition. It does, however, mean that the multimillion-dollar record companies have lost a huge financial wedge if talented artists can work around them with integrity intact.

As a capitalist, I believe that competition is good for any market, so it is instructive that album sales are down despite the increasing variety of consumer options. The concept of which the industry has lost sight is, ironically, exactly that to which it points to tarnish public perception of self-funded projects: its main "value-add" is acting as a barrier for arbitration, a protector of quality. However, *artistic* quality is not in its best interest as a business because it puts too much power in the hands of the artists. Therefore, the quality that the business-types have chased has been *production* quality, and technology is enabling individual musicians to achieve this on smaller budgets. The problem for the major labels is that the formula by which they've found and galvanized fads — to circumvent the rarer creative talent — has lost its fuel.

For trendy music, musical ability is far from necessary, a lack of it merely requiring more talent in the music's producer. If "a program called Auto-Tune... allows a producer to correct the

pitch of a poorly sung note with a mouse click” for the purposes of “vanity CDs,” the big-corporations’ engineers must be able to practically fake the existence of singers. All that the bar-lowering technology has done is to expand the possibilities for those with budgets too small to hire “co”-composers who do most of the writing or engineers and producers who can make frogs sound like princes of pop with production tricks.

Stripping slanted language, such as “vanity,” from the comparison, at what point does a self-financed CD cross into “professional” territory based on sales? Ultimately, for a promising artist, the elusive goal of “commercial success” comes down to the same thing no matter who produces the final product: marketing. With music especially, many “independent” artists put out better material than most of what passes for “professional.” The real challenge is finding a broad enough audience to finance continued movement down the artistic path.

I believe that the arts, from literature to music to visual, are at one of those points in history at which opportunity exists for a tremendous change for the better. Technology has helped to level a playing field previously dominated by those with financial clout. As with music sharing on the Internet, technology has also spurred established companies to attempt to suppress certain outlets for artistic work. The opening created by these two related factors can be filled by new visions for filtering the available artistic output, narrowing choices for the public.

If, as Mr. Rosenthal claims, “it seems like everyone is [recording CDs],” then there must certainly be enough brilliant but unknown musicians to displace all of the fabricated stars promoted by the major labels. Finding and promoting them can be done well, or it can be done poorly. To give those who would do it well a chance, the more open and flooded market is, the better. The goal should be to turn the market’s current irresolution into an opportunity to shift the degree to which talent and ability determine success — as opposed to just marketing.

But even artists who must “make do with smaller audiences and record sales in the hundreds rather than the hundreds of

thousands” are still selling hundreds more than nothing. At heart, the motivation for playing music derives from its being fun. The motivation to record that music derives from a desire to share ourselves with others. And increased participation, far from being a smothering influence, can only benefit the arts and artists in the long run.

1. St. John, Warren “Tryin’ Hard to Get Free, Via Rap on Your Own CD.” *The New York Times* 3 March 2002

## A Bright Future for Revolution, Part 2

4/29/02

In college, I was often the lone voice for certain sides of arguments. Even though I frequently spent hours battling not only professors, but also every vocal student in my classes, I was able to find little reasons to maintain my efforts. Reminding myself that I was right was one such reason. The occasional confession, outside of the classroom, by fellow students that they agreed with me was another. And, of course, it served my ego well that, by battling the PhDed professors, I felt elevated above my own undergraduate position and that I imparted ideas into discussions in which they might otherwise have gone unsaid.

After college, still feeling too young to explore the AM dial, I listened to National Public Radio during my lengthy commute to work because it was the only FM source that featured ideas rather than distraction. After a while, however, the combination of traffic and NPR began to feel like a nightmare — surrounded by a bubble of steel and glass through which I could not pour my beliefs into the flow of ideas. And nobody else was making my points; I never heard what I thought to be obvious rebuttals.

Only after a climactic episode of stress, after which I gave up on news radio, did I find a crack in the glass. The local evening news coverage of a controversy at Brown University regarding an ad against reparations for slavery spurred me to investigate the ad's creator, David Horowitz, whose *Frontpage Magazine* I soon discovered on the Internet. Here, aggregated from sites across the Web, were articles written by people who, as it seemed to me, had been those lone voices in their classrooms. Oh, I frequently

disagree with what I read there, and much of it has become monotonous over the months, but it was so refreshing to read arguments that bore a logical and philosophical resemblance to mine that weren't prefaced by "people who disagree with our hero claim that..."

Then came September 11. Although my cable provider didn't offer Fox News, all of the Fox stations transmitted its content for several days. Even in the context of such a clear incidence of attack and loss of *innocent* life, Fox set itself apart from the other television news outlets. None of the anchors made snide comments, as did Peter Jennings, hinting that President Bush was acting in a cowardly fashion by staying airborne, and mixed in with those insisting that we must guard against domestic anti-Arab backlash were voices reminding us that we had to remain clear about the face of the enemy. In short, Fox was unlike any television news that I had ever seen.

Also in those desperate days, during which I was afraid to lose my connection to current events when I couldn't be near the television or the Internet, I ventured into the world of AM radio. In this alternate reality, I discovered that Rush Limbaugh isn't the right-wing extremist madman that the mainstream media had led me to expect. I also found, in invigorating contrast to NPR, that the opportunity was built into the format for those lonely souls in their steel and glass bubbles to call in and be heard.

I am aware of the tendency to extrapolate trends in our own lives to broad segments of society. Even so, I — as many others have said in context of life after September 11 — sense a sea change in what the public expects of its informational resources. The voices that have methodically been expurgated from faculty lounges and television and public radio studios have been escaping to alternative outlets for many years. But, with Fox News, they have begun working their way back into a position from which to offer a more apparent conduit to resources that have heretofore relied on happenstance for neophytes, such as myself, to stumble across them.

And I believe that this alternative media is beginning to change the rules of the game. Members of Congress who have felt secure making outlandish statements to select groups that wanted to hear such nonsense are beginning to find their words conveyed to election-threatening numbers of people. Senators who are used to having their pure politicking filtered for mass consumption are finding dropped jaws in response to their “trial balloons.”

More profound, however, is the diminishing power of such putdowns as “right wing” or “conservative.” Fox News isn’t so much “right-leaning” as it is willing to present opposing arguments. In many cases, the person making the “conservative” argument simply makes more sense. In other cases, previously glossed-over voices have their rhetorical strategies (such as talking above opponents or playing lawyerly word games) put in a too-revealing light. Spending time reading supposedly conservative columnists, listening to Republican talk radio hosts, and watching balanced debate shows has convinced me that most people who are “conservative” today are still quite liberal from a broader historical perspective. My conservatism, for example, far from being cut from the same cloth as fascism, would have been considered a “reserved progressivism” before society’s reckless gimmenow leftward swing in the latter half of the twentieth century.

At first, accepting the label of “conservative” *feels* like admitting intransigence and opposition to “progress.” Revolutionary activity has a better connotation than does reactionary activity, even where they amount to the same thing. But I believe that the public is smarter than it is usually given credit for being. When one source of distilled information proves to be not so much distilled as strained to remove an entire way of thinking, we average folk will seek out that which has been removed. When regular programming pushed Fox News off of my television, I contacted my cable provider, and I must not have been alone in this endeavor because the station was given a permanent home by the end of December.

This is how the free flow of information — indeed, freedom — is supposed to work. They *report*; we *decide*. When an establishment in any area strives to discredit or hide opposition, that is *prima facie* evidence that truth is no longer a guiding principle for its leaders. And when a source of information offers only the point of view that its audience wants to hear, you can be sure that somebody, somewhere, knows better.

### Choosing a Lyric Battle

05/06/02

Sometimes the brief news items that slide between graver matters and commercials have a disproportionate resonance in the mind. True, part of this is that small stories can be easier to relate to and stick out among long-running major news items. They can also illustrate both the end-points of larger movements in everyday life and the buds of human interaction from which global affairs ultimately grow. Therefore, these stories often represent valuable moments for discussion and education for those who catch them in the media as well as those who participate in them.

One such story involves the Skarin family of Woodbine, Iowa, which has called upon the ACLU to assist its efforts to prevent the twin children's school choir from singing a musical rendition of "The Lord's Prayer" at graduation. Even when I considered myself an atheist, this type of thinking struck me as irrational, and an atheist without rationality is a *Homo Sapien* with nothing. For those who don't believe in *any* god, a song about a particular God isn't much different than a song about any topic powerful enough to move musicians to compose.

According to the ACLU press release,<sup>1</sup> the parents' objective is "to protect their parental right to raise their children free from government religious coercion." In other words, this is a border skirmish in the war to protect our nation from the reign of religious zealots. With reference to the Middle East, Ireland, and the Balkans, the Iowa Civil Liberty Union's executive director, Ben Stone, states that "if we allow a small town to set up an

official religion, then religious intolerance will rule.” Mr. Stone here takes two giant leaps: first, that a local *high school choir* singing a hymn equals the implementation of an “official town religion” and, second, that the pernicious nature of religion will inevitably lead to public stoning of peace-loving atheists.

To be fair, depending on the longevity of this choral “tradition” (about which I’ve found varying accounts) and giving some weight to the temper of our times, the school district may not have been entirely judicious in selecting that particular song. Even so, when choosing battles, the threat or benefit must be weighed against the cost of fighting. For atheists, this particular threat doesn’t even include insulting one’s own god, and the benefit of resistance can only be seen as bolstering a societal principle. On the level of an individual family, such a relatively insignificant victory for an abstract ideal is even more irrational when the effects on the children are considered.

Fourteen-year-old Donovan complains that the school “is basically forcing [them] to sing praise to a God that [they] don’t even believe in,” and he’s not comfortable with that. But is handling the situation in this way really going to bring him and his sister a net gain in comfort? Not according to the implication of their mother’s comment to Fox News that the family is finding “out really quick who [their] real friends are.”<sup>2</sup> Or the confession of another choir member’s parent that the injunction against even practicing the song is “ticking a lot of people off, frankly.” Or even the ACLU’s gratuitous note that a previous anti-school-prayer plaintiff received death threats.

Simply in terms of teaching these particular children how to interact with others throughout their lives, I have to believe that better approaches could have been taken. All exaggerations of import aside, the singing could be seen as an act of respect for those, many more numerous, local families who believe in the value of the song and the tradition. The parents could also have worked with their children — and representatives of the school — to find some constructive compromise or other arrangement. (I suspect that, had this been tried, the ACLU would have detailed

the school's intransigence in its press release. However, there is certainly room in the informational gap here for scenarios in which school officials would be more deserving of blame.)

Or the parents could have taught Donovan and Ruby about choosing battles. The greater cost, in my opinion, is the perpetuation of a frame of mind that has led to our overly litigious society: that all problems, big and small, should be solved by invoking law and government. According to the ACLU, "the school's policy basically forced [Ruby] to be disrespectful to her classmates" because, in her words, "I am not giving the prayer the respect that I know they feel it should be given."

But respect does not require agreement, only serious enough consideration to weigh its importance to her classmates against the cost to her. Avoiding making a public spectacle of the issue helps, too. Rather than teach their children to work through differences with others' strong beliefs to the benefit of all, the Skarins are teaching them to run to the ACLU.

1. "ICLU Brings Lawsuit On Behalf of Students Required to Sing Lord's Prayer at Graduation." *American Civil Liberties Union News* 1 April 2002 <<http://www.aclu.org/ReligiousLiberty/ReligiousLiberty.cfm?ID=10113&c=139>>
2. Brown, Steve "Parent Sues School Over Graduation Tune." *Fox News* 2 May 2002 <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,51745,00.html>>

## Grownup 101

05/13/02

I was reminded this week that I was never given the opportunity to take Grownup 101 in college. Perhaps the administration cut the class for lack of interested students. Or perhaps the problem is in finding reasonable professors. Although it often seems that most anybody will handle the topic on a lesson-by-lesson basis (even for free), surprisingly few are willing to devote conscious effort to it.

One day this week, when I stepped out onto my porch in the morning to put on my sneakers and walk the dog, I saw a small boy crumpled up on the road and a bigger boy walking away straightening his hat. Two kids, about the size of the one on the ground, stood over him snickering, saying to the larger boy, "Hey! You know that's littering don't you!"

The school bus picks up at the corner of my yard, so I often hear the mirthful shouts of children before I'm entirely awake. I recall the way early morning felt when I was their age. Somehow, it was different — as if the birds were singing that something wonderful and unexpected could happen before the sun set again. Especially with the summer break working its lazy way through the calendar. Now, with the warm weather approaching, I've thought of putting out lemonade for the children so I could vicariously feel the difference of spring to those still in school. But I've decided that such an act, generous though it may be, would seem odd... at least until my daughter's out there waiting with them. Although, I suspect she'll be embarrassed if I try it then.

But I rarely watch the young students interact. They are part of the morning, like dew or sunrise breezes. So I didn't have much to go on when I walked out in my slippers to help the defeated boy up from the pavement. By the time I reached the street, he was already on his feet and walking away from the bus stop — presumably toward home. “Are you okay?” I asked. He told me he was and kept walking.

*So what now?* I wondered. The bus was just down the street, so I considered tattling on the fight's victor. He had a slightly puffed look that suggested that he had taken a hit or two. And he didn't look proud to have won. This threw me. None of the children gave me an excuse to act. Having not seen the fight itself, I decided that I shouldn't do or say anything too drastic. I gave them all disapproving looks as they got on the bus.

The scene reminded me of the tenuous nature of adults' power over children. There's really not much we can — or would — do that would cause more than discomfort or inconvenience to a child. Yet, somehow we remain images of authority to them. I imagine it's partly that kids think adults know something that they don't about how the world works and stuff. Such knowledge could be a powerful tool to leverage... if we really possessed it.

I spent much of my idle time that morning wondering what I could have said to turn the experience into a lesson. I would have said something about picking on people your own size, but the ashamed look on the big kid's face suggested that that was a lesson he'd already picked up. By lunchtime, I had decided that, once a baseline understanding of right and wrong is established (hopefully by parents), perhaps it is enough for adults to make their presence known. Just by stepping into the scene, maybe adults can bring an air of order and taint any wayward delight with a “we shouldn't have done that” feeling.

But it's hard to act when you've yet to receive your Adult Handbook. And life is too shaded for book theories to work even if we had them. A few weeks ago, I wrote a column called “On Sight, Out of Mind” in which I wrote that authority figures, coming into a conflict midway must strive to make quick

judgements based on “comparisons of histories, body language, witnesses, and other information.” Well, in this case, I had no history from which to work, the witnesses were silent, and the big kid’s body language only succeeded in thwarting the role that I had intended to play based on the script in my head.

I’m glad that I didn’t do anything, though. I later found out that the three smaller boys tease and abuse the larger kid on a nearly daily basis. Now, I might say to him, “Go get ’em.” But then again, maybe I need to do more research first... or maybe I need more on-the-job training.

## Self-Evident Equality

05/20/02

“We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...”

As I was taught to read this historic phrase, the “created” aspect is a figure of speech — one of those peculiarities of chronology that future generations can interpret according to their contemporary beliefs. But the idea of a “Creator” who has “endowed” is neither merely a poetic personification of nature nor a nod to the less-sophisticated masses who would make up the new nation being proposed. In fact, without acceptance of this underlying “Truth,” the “equal” part might not seem so “self-evident.”

If something is true, we accept it; if something is false, we reject it. The problem arises with visceral desires for falsehoods to be true, or vice versa. Discovering truth or falsehood for one’s self is a crucial element to individual growth, but it can be taken too far. People seem to become most virulent rhetorically when they cannot find it in themselves to justify a change in belief and, therefore, defend convictions that they know — or at least fear — to be wrong.

Consider the statistical suggestion of racial differences in score on IQ tests. The popular response to the supporting data is either to deny that it is accurate or to state that “those tests don’t measure anything, anyway.” To similar findings on the SATs, the answer is “those tests are biased.” But these tests must measure

*something* if their results are consistent, and they must be *useful* if that *something* can be shown to correlate to a desired quality, such as the ability to succeed in college.

A project of many in the academic world, keeping with the SAT example, is to invent reasons to disregard the test. Simultaneously, the same movement is experimenting with other entrance criteria that will yield predetermined demographic results. The danger of such quests — regardless of the participants' intentions — is that they completely circumvent a question that is crucial to advancement of the cause that they profess to champion: if the *something* being measured is of value, what is diminishing it among a particular group, and what can be done to increase it among that group?

The underlying issue, particularly among intellectuals, is that they haven't the foundation to declare inherent value. Therefore, they haven't a philosophical basis to declare that a given individual is worth more than the sum of his or her abilities or "value to society" (whatever that might mean beyond economics). As Jonah Goldberg points out in a recent column about elitism for *National Review Online*,<sup>1</sup> the idea that two individuals' or groups' abilities or achievements will always prove equivalent by some objective measure is ludicrous on its face.

Taking as a matter of faith that everybody is equal in the eyes of the Creator, we can keep score without feeling as if we're diminishing the innate value of the "loser" of a particular competition. In fact, we can all benefit by honestly assessing to whom specific tasks or courses of study should fall. The philosophy behind "leveling the playing field" essentially admits that some people are better at some things than others, assumes that that fact inherently makes "winners" objectively better, and, therefore, decides that the difference must be hidden.

For people of this ideology, their behavior suggests that they don't believe that all people are inherently equal at all, so — both to preserve some semblance of morality and to deny a truth in favor of falsehood — they declare contrary statements to be taboo. "Who are you and I to judge?" Since this insistence cannot

possibly be confirmed logically, it must embitter those with the facility to comprehend it that they are required to continue the charade.

Of course, the group in whose best interest it is to pronounce the evil of judgment is that which currently has too much. By calling off the game, they ensure that everybody keeps what they've got. They bank on a different statement in *The Declaration of Independence*, that "Experience hath shewn, that Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while Evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the Forms to which they are accustomed."

But the charade will be seen for what it is. I have faith.

1. Goldberg, Jonah "In Defense of Elitism." *National Review Online* 13 May 2002 <<http://www.nationalreview.com/goldberg/goldberg051302.asp>>

## Breaking the Slump

05/27/02

Sometimes nothing makes sense; sometimes everything makes sense. At least this is what I've found as I've progressed in my education. In this respect, mental games are much like any other endeavor. I've had days — weeks even — when it's seemed like pianos have played themselves under my fingers. I've also experienced periods during which I'm skeptical that my hands are actually connected to my brain. The same is true in sports. Streak; slump. Lucidity; confusion.

My music studies helped me to form a perspective that makes the slumps encouraging — to a degree. The finger-tangling times, like burning muscles during a workout, are indicative of growth. The hands and the brain are coordinating toward improved performance. The trend isn't really slump/streak, which implies a pendulum of ability with no long-term progress; it is actually climb/plateau, periodically struggling and eventually reaching a higher level.

Ideas and thinking have followed this pattern for me. On any given topic, I'll feel as if I could debate my conclusion with the best of minds on the other side of the issue. In a day or two, however, I won't even be able to explain my opinion to myself. Often a new idea wrenches the machinery of my comprehension, requiring me to rebuild, perhaps adding parts or shifting gears.

Just as often, I'll discover that a revelation that I've reached after long bewilderment is only tangentially related to the real issue. Given my major in college (English) and the era in which I attended (late 1990s), it shouldn't be surprising that a reigning

concern of my classes and studies was race. After agonizing over the “construction” of race and the complexities of “oppression,” I reached a conclusion that nobody cared to hear. Too many people have an investment in maintaining the status quo; too many people profit from division to have an interest in solving any real problems. In other words, my confusion derived from a way of understanding that didn’t address the central issue, and, therefore, I had to shift my thought in a new direction. In this case, that meant redirecting my inquiry toward ways to penetrate a social illusion spun by the race hucksters.

But the important point in all this is that, despite the thought and rethought and the shifts in perspective, the original concept remains. Whether it is to understand how people of all races can live in unprejudiced equality, to master an instrument, or to win the World Series, the goal doesn’t change, just our way of approaching the question — our technique, or even our team. After my periods of confusion, I’ve come to the same basic conclusions that I’d already had, but with more depth for having drifted and more clarity for having blinked.

The “simple” answer becomes no less true, no matter how much we might lose sight of it during times of confusion. It may be simple to say “killing is always wrong, but sometimes you have to do wrong to do right.” Perhaps the seeming contradiction or the nagging “Why?” causes us to reject the simplicity. After a while, we might develop an understanding of why killing is wrong based on ideas of society and community; yet, within the context of society, it is sometimes necessary to break that rule. If this answer does not satisfy, perhaps a new round of “confusion” will expand the picture to include abstract theology and philosophy.

Considering the reality that our behavior as human beings does not necessarily vary based on the depth of our understanding of truths, only on the substance, an intellectual genius has no higher claim to value as a human than does a league MVP. The most-earthy blue-collar worker is worth no less in a broad sense than the most-brilliant Ivy League professor. In

specific cases, he might be worth more. But this does not mean that a person must master a specific skill or body of knowledge to have value.

Beyond truths that anybody might grasp as maxims (e.g., “Thou shalt not kill.”) the intellectual is merely a master of specialized information. While I personally find that it improves my own life to broaden and deepen understanding of it, as with any specific skill, this extra-quotidian information cannot be extrapolated into a measure of general value. In fact, seeking such knowledge can do damage to one’s moral sense. As can be observed in almost every corner of modern life — and as has become starkly apparent after September 11 — too much thinking can lead to a lack of clarity, even so far as to justify evil.

Groups of people often act in ways that mirror, on a larger scale, trends in individual life. I can only pray that our culture is merely in a slump right now and that from confusion will come clarity. Nothing has seemed to make sense in our society for a long, long time.

## New Reasons to Take Up an Old Young Cause

06/03/02

When I was newly 18 years old, one of my high school classes somehow got on the topic of the national drinking age. We all knew the arguments for our obvious opinion: “I can go to *war*; but I can’t have a beer to relax on leave”; “I can get *married*, but I can’t have champagne at my reception”; “I can *vote*, but I can’t get drunk enough to believe what the politicians are saying.”

The class ultimately concluded that a major obstacle to our being able to drink legally within the following three years was the diminished importance of the issue to the majority of registered voters. We reasoned that, once people are old enough to drink, younger folks’ inability to do so is of very little consequence to them, so they don’t give the issue thought, let alone lobby to change the law. Until very recently, I was living proof that we were correct. However, a recent news story has brought the drinking age to mind, and a new perspective — parenthood — has, ironically, reaffirmed my forgotten convictions.

William Anderson of West Warwick, RI, might agree. Mr. Anderson, believing it to be “inevitable” that his son’s crowd would drink on prom night, opted to host a tent party in his back yard. While he didn’t supply any alcohol, he expected — and allowed — it to make an appearance and wanted to provide “a safe haven,” with all car keys collected and no attendees permitted to leave.

The police also made an appearance (based on a noise complaint) and charged the well-intentioned father with the felony of “procuring alcohol for minors.” Thus arose the conflict.

In Mr. Anderson's words, "I was doing the common-sense and intelligent thing, but if you read the law to the letter of the law, what I did was illegal."

The central problem is that in dealing with people, from individual parenting to international diplomacy, rigidity rarely works and sometimes does not provide the best solution, anyway. When attempting to set guidelines for children, buffer zones must be expected. With a drinking age of 21, even the most family-friendly of communities will include young adults within a certain proximity to this magic number who will pursue the illicit activity.

Although the age range of the Andersons' party was 16–22, most of those in attendance were probably high school seniors, predominantly 18 years old, and a summer break away from the freedom of college. With college becoming an increasingly common activity, a drinking age of 21 effectively eliminates parental influence on what kind of drinkers their children will be. The "buffer zone" primarily lies during a time when the young adults are away from their parents.

To the extent that the drive to drink bleeds into high school, parents are faced with a ridiculous choice: either effectively "jail" their children or — like bureaucrats — make sure that they've got plausible deniability around their children's activities. Mr. Anderson would be much less culpable had he either loomed over the party, probably leading those determined to drink to leave, or arranged the evening in such a way as to "not know" about the alcohol, including not taking away car keys. The day the story ran in *The Providence Journal*,<sup>1</sup> many callers into a local talk radio broadcast applauded Mr. Anderson for doing "the right thing" by giving the kids a safe environment in which to do what many of them would likely have done anyway. However, none of the (adult) callers made the more practical suggestion that it shouldn't be illegal for 18-year-olds to drink.

If it weren't illegal, Mr. Anderson could have hosted the party in an even more open fashion. It also would put the spotlight on the younger partygoers because they would become more unique. As it is, the adult had to walk a fine line between

controlling the party and knowing too much about what was going on. The same is true among the teenagers themselves. At 18, they have the right to do just about anything, including drive. However, they will persist in doing this one thing for which they are still supposed to wait because, first, it is forbidden, and second, it is part of our culture, like it or not. The danger of the activity can only increase to the degree that its illegality decreases incentive for reasonable precautions.

Shifting the “buffer zone” to 16- and 17-year-old children, while not optimal, wouldn’t likely change much, at this point. Even if it did, parents would have increased opportunity to guide their behavior, and the older kids at parties wouldn’t have their own criminal activity standing in the way of offering any help that seems advisable. This hypothetical also points to a conceptual problem: 18-year-olds aren’t “minors.”

William Anderson might have taken a risk in choosing to teach responsible drinking rather than strict adherence to the law, but that shouldn’t be a conflict. Although I believe the police were correct to enforce the law as it stands, I hope Mr. Anderson receives some degree of leniency from a jury and judge (at least in sentencing). If not, perhaps he’ll become the poster boy for a new movement. Grownups everywhere: write your state assemblies!

1. Rosenbaum, S.I. “Father charged for allowing alcohol at prom party.” *The Providence Journal* 30 May 2002: A-01

## In the Fab Shadow

06/10/02

I hate the 60s. Not the decade itself — that would be foolish — but the “era” that is loosely aligned and firmly associated with it. Mine isn’t an ideological spite. I believe in many of the *ideals* behind the “causes” of that time, and some of my current beliefs would not have become feasible without the social changes that took place then.

What I hate is the insinuation within the popular culture for my entire life that the 60s constituted the pinnacle of history. For subsequent generations, the 60s represent that legendary party in a community into which we’ve recently moved. The games were more fun, the socializing easier, and the band better. But the extravaganza can never be repeated. The house in which it was held burned down; several parents lost their children; and everybody is still reeling, all these years later, from the hangover. Moreover, the partygoers rummaged through every drawer of innovation, grabbing all things new and unknown, throwing them around, and discarding them, sullied and used.

From those years when we were too young to understand the significance of John Lennon’s murder, the children of the following decades have been urged to see the 60s as an adolescent nirvana. Not only did the participants in society “get it” back then, but it was the first time “it” had ever been gotten. Youthful trends in art, thinking, music, and so on splashed into the mass consciousness fully formed and perfect. From that perfection, culture — all those parts of life that exist, somehow, beyond everyday living — could not do otherwise than incontrovertibly decline.

I'm sure that many people just went about their lives during those years. But they would not be inclined to take up the task of defining the times. They were simply living; the times were simply times. Therefore, those who perpetuate the legacy of the 60s, beyond disproportionately seeking cultural careers (such as art, social scholarship, and media), tend to glorify it. Perhaps the image of the 60s handed down to those of us too late to experience it is so idyllic because this group of people — the activists for remembrance — were too caught up in the tempest, or just too stoned, back then to have retained the memory that they were, in George Harrison's words, merely "spotty teenagers."

With the glossed and rosy — perhaps hazy — societal memory of the 60s, bold statements are made on the *assumption* that important aspects of the 60s were perfect. And those aspects that were undeniably strong in those years are taken as crucial to humanity. Take a common sentiment about pop music (from Ian MacDonald's *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties*):<sup>1</sup> "when examining... Sixties pop, [we] are looking at something on a higher scale of achievement... music which *no contemporary artist* can claim to match in feeling, variety, formal invention, and sheer out-of-the-blue inspiration." (342; emphasis added).

Possible counters to this claim range from citing less-commercial modern musicians to questioning the inherent value of "out-of-the-blue inspiration" to suggesting that those qualities may be found in other areas of music — or beyond music. But the claim of the 60s panegyric is not merely a statement of objective comparison. As MacDonald goes on to explain, "[t]hat the same can be said of other musical forms... confirms that something in the soul of Western culture began to die during the late Sixties."

If that "soul" is presumed to have existed throughout Western history, a logical suggestion would be that the movement of the 60s is what killed it. But this isn't what MacDonald or other sixtiesophiles mean. They mean to claim credit both for creating that soul from the barren homogeneity of the 50s and for using it up before the 70s. But both counts are ludicrous. Sticking with

music, Bob Dylan built on a legacy of American folk music, and there have been, are, and will continue to be musicians as good or better than Dylan in almost every respect. They may not, it is true, find the broad audience, and, while they certainly blend folk and rock as Dylan did, it will never be shocking for them to do so. However, modern Dylans are picking around for new directions; every decade has firsts.

To the extent that claims of the 60s' uniqueness are true, the detrimental result of promotion of the "perfect old days" is that subsequent generations have tried either to repeat accomplishments and events or, worse, to outdo them. Not only does this impulse ensure perpetual imitation (direct or inverted), but seeking to "outdo" for its own sake is a dangerous endeavor. Many people who've come of age in the decades since have trudged on in a linear fashion, descending the culture into chaos and stupidity. Others have attempted to deny competition by propelling society into radically new spheres — trading grassy meadows for cyberspace or higher consciousness for genetics.

Neither of these strategies, nor any blend of them, is the way to go about overcoming the legacy of our parents' generation. As the first Americans born well into the 70s begin their march into positions of responsibility, we must insist on seeing the 60s as part of a longer conversation — albeit an especially vociferous passage. We must realize that the "next Beatles" won't sound much like the Beatles.

Most importantly, acknowledging that the 60s grew from what came before and did not fulfill the purpose or the promise of humanity allows us to see that when a man has walked down the wrong road too far, backtracking is progress. There may not be anything radically new until we find a better road, but that will come — only, the old folks may not know it when it does.

1. MacDonald, Ian, *Revolution in the Head: The Beatles' Records and the Sixties* (Pimlico, 1998)

## Databased Profiling on Common Turf

06/17/02

As a regular ol' citizen, I'm getting pretty sick of hearing about "turf wars" among government bureaucracies. If the staffs of these organizations are hesitant to share information and influence, they need a little prodding. Perhaps the suggestion that a series of new hires and promotions might follow a refusal to work together would suffice.

But such serious statements would be unbalanced if our nation continues to play politically correct footsy under the negotiating table. FBI agent Coleen Rowley has become famous for pointing out the squashing of an investigation of Zacarias Moussaoui, but very few people are asking why it happened. Yes, the layers of bureaucracy are to blame, but a specific element of the "evidence" probably decreased its likelihood of jumping through the necessary hoops.

It occurs to me that computers aren't much concerned about losing turf. They don't worry about losing their jobs to politically correct lawsuits. And when people give information to computers, they don't worry about the machines' judging them. At the risk of suggesting something so obvious that somebody who gets paid a lot of money to think of these things has surely thought of it, I propose a database system for terrorist information.

All security agencies, government organizations, and police departments would be compelled to input information that seems even possibly related to terrorist activity. To minimize the complexity of training and usage, the entry point would not be yet another form. Instead, an intuitive Web site might offer one

rapid medium, or an 800 number could lead to homeland defense experts who would walk callers through quick reports. At low levels, authorities wouldn't require access to the system, only the ability to feed data into it, a factor that would limit the exposure to hackers.

A report could consist of anything from vague suspicions to specific occurrences, with each given a weight, according to a predetermined point scale, to differentiate importance. The person making the report could also specify a duration rating to decrease the importance score over time and automatically archive it after a while — preventing “high alert” from building based on a lot of nothing over a long period of time.

While the difficulty of making a report would be minimal, the benefits could be huge: preventing terrorism, circumventing bureaucratic and political wrangling, and diminishing the influence of political correctness. Regarding the first, a computer could automatically group and count occurrences of recurring names, organizations, or activities. It could also be used to sort and search by any given criteria. For public awareness, such an application could increase the utility and import of a tiered alert system such as Tom Ridge has already put in place. Higher “danger” levels could automatically be triggered by scenarios ranging from 10,000 vague impressions (creepy people) to 1,000 related, low-level suspicions (strange flight-school activity) to one very specific threat (a missing nuclear bomb).

Regarding the second class of benefits, circumventing bureaucratic tendencies, the actual information that is shared could be tailored to answer organizations' concerns. With one — new — group able to draw from the entire database, there would be little reason for parallel organizations to access anything but aggregate data. If a bureau or agency believes that it is on to something, procedures would enable it to approach the “centralized” department, broadening involvement, but retaining credit for the specific connection made.

Here's a simplified example. Suppose I notice a group of young men, all wearing light blue slacks, writing in notepads in

the vicinity of the corner gas station on fuel-delivery day. Thinking this odd, I report my observation to a local police officer, who has had the minimal training necessary to understand that this might be database material. However, since the incident is hardly threatening, the officer only designates an importance score of one, with a half-life of one month, when he speaks with the friendly Homeland Security Specialist.

The database system earmarks my report because it falls under a transportation/fuel specification that intelligence personnel have deemed of concern. It also highlights the peculiarity of the uniform pants. As it turns out, 825 other cops around the country also create level-one records of strange activity on fuel-delivery day. While only 60 of them refer to light blue slacks, several hundred mention some identifying piece of clothing. Fifty of the records are a month old, so, combined, they only amount to 25 points. Meanwhile, the FBI, CIA, and INS separately input a total of 10 cases of student-visa holders seeking commercial truck-driving licenses — in different areas, so each receives a weight of only 20.

The system groups these incidences as all having to do with transportation, specifically fuel and trucks, and generates an automatic summary for the Department of Homeland Security. If the FBI has built a file having to do with the Lincoln Tunnel, for example, the summary might help them to connect some of those infamous dots. At the same time, because the number of related reports has reached 1,000, the public-alert system increases to the next stage of warning, and toll collectors and commuters, having a better sense that the increased alert corresponds to real information, might feel even more comfortable reporting suspicious activity.

The third area of benefit, decreased sensitivity to political correctness, would also derive from the “anonymous warehouse” feel of the database. Perhaps such a system would have made the difference to Johnell Bryant, the Department of Agriculture official who turned down Mohamed Atta for a loan to buy a plane and proceeded to ignore the implication as he did all but carve “I

am a terrorist” into her desk. She mightn’t have worried about being impolite or, worse, discriminatory by reporting Atta. She could have taken comfort in the fact that her report would be one of many — thus insignificant unless combined with other, similar reports, in which case her “profile” would be justified before any bureaucrat had the opportunity to drop it as too politically dangerous to touch.

## Idol for an Idle Evening

06/24/02

*American Idol* is the latest “reality” television show. The cynical quotation marks are especially appropriate for this particular show because the “reality” that it seeks to convey is a fantasy even outside of the television. Basically, thus far, three judges have narrowed down thousands of auditioners to about one hundred and fifty and then trimmed that group to thirty. Now, viewers can call in and vote for the singing under-twenty-five-year-old of their choice based on performances. The winner becomes “The American Idol.”

Although this title brings with it no direct remuneration, a record deal is part of the prize, and the winner of a United Kingdom version went on to become a multimillionaire superstar (as did the runner up). At the very least, winning the “contest” would represent a huge leap through a door that many strive for years to crack open with a toe.

I have to confess that the show has captured my imagination. Never mind that, whatever chance I ever had at rock stardom, it was despite my voice rather than completely owing to it, which success in the show must be. Never mind that I was never the type to set tweens’ (as the marketers have begun to call the “preteen” age group) hearts a-patter. Watching these adolescents hoping and striving for an opportunity to procure a life that will allow them to preserve adolescence indefinitely, I have felt the vague longing for a similar opportunity.

The fantasy of fame is certainly compelling. Of course, there are obvious drawbacks to being recognized everywhere, and

contingents of the public will always exist that vocally dislike any given famous person. Even amenable fans and critics can be lost, and money misused can cause more problems than it solves. All told, the core of fame's attraction may be the opportunity itself — to experience the smooth lift and to be given the controls. Perhaps by faithful and skillful perseverance, one can use that good fortune to live an extraordinary life... and to be acknowledged as having done so.

Society's more-common life paths can seem monotonous, lacking a justified anticipation of just-around-the-corner success. Even the most skillfully handled office project yields not much more hope than of incremental progress in a career. For one pursuing star-making endeavors, maybe the next show or album or movie or book will strike a nerve and change a life — perhaps even that of its creator. In this respect, even maintaining a hobbyist's level of activity leaves room for hope.

But the chime of hope is easily lost in the static of everyday living. I've watched with mild sadness as friends carried hope into their thirties by resolving to enjoy an activity for its own sake only to later diminish their dreams' value as a tradeoff for other — entirely positive, respectable, and even laudable — areas of adult life. I myself am nearing thirty, and I have come to create with diminished expectations of reward beyond having created. And I have become better by that resolution. My college piano professor once told me that the day he began enjoying his performances — and the day he progressed to the next stage in his ability — came when he figured out that the chances were poor that any given performance was “The One.”

Personal fulfillment notwithstanding, a dream becomes more difficult to sustain without external hints of progress. Too easily, the gig a month or the essay a week becomes redundant. Over time, it becomes more difficult to believe that any one might prove special, and raising intensity or frequency might conflict with other obligations or desires.

This is both the problem and the solution. If it is difficult to understand why one performance or project should prove different than all others, it is also probably true that it will be a

performance or project just like all the others that proves decisive. If it is impossible to envision the steps of opportunity, it is also true that they will surprise when they come. Perhaps a new “reality” show will come to town.

After a brief recrudescence of the desire to be a teen idol, I turned my mind to *The Redwood Review*, my writers’ group’s very first publication, which I edited, designed, and produced. Sure, I can take, and have taken, great pleasure in the book’s production and in my having produced it. And, true, there’s at least a slim hope that some of the works therein, mine or others’, will lead to a further literary-career step.

A year ago, I hadn’t known that such an opportunity would present itself. Certainly, the other authors weren’t expecting it. The book serves as proof that we are all — from the youngest to the oldest — still in motion, still acting in the world, and still creating opportunities. It is valuable as a reminder to hope, and we should remind ourselves that hope can — *of itself* — facilitate happiness, which not even being “The American Idol” can do, of itself. And happiness can be the only universal measurement for success.

## Meetings on the Road, II: Immortal Conflict

07/01/02

From farther down the road than I had been,  
a road I'd traveled but had never picked,  
came two old men who looked of warring kin,  
their tribes engaged in topical conflict.

But as I neared the spot where they conversed,  
beside a bridge that only one could cross,  
I heard, "After you," then, "No, please, you first."  
So I asked, producing a coin to toss,

"What's down this road that goodwill should ensue?"  
"Just as you've passed," they said, "more of the same.  
All people born learn grievances anew,  
but when they die, so dies relented blame."

"Then would that you could teach the young," I said.  
They laughed and patted me upon the head.

# Quality Inspectors to Make Rounds

07/08/02

**New York, June 3, 2012** — The New York chapter of Defenders of Ensured Termination Healthcare will host a skewer barbecue at City Hall this Saturday to celebrate the mayor's decision to require Abortion Quality Inspectors in all ob-gyn medical facilities.

“We believe that doctors that ask patients who want to exercise their option of choice to seek the procedure elsewhere put those women at risk of receiving substandard medical care,” says Kathy Quillit, executive director of DETH. She adds, “And the recently passed law requiring all doctors to provide abortion care is not enough on its own. Who knows what these fanatic doctors might do?”

To safeguard against “medical activism,” Abortion Quality Inspectors will be licensed to carry firearms while protecting patients' right to safe and comfortable abortions. The move comes after some doctors refused to comply with city requirements that they learn and provide unwanted-pregnancy termination procedures.

The policy will go into effect on July 1, the ten year anniversary of the inauguration of New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's decision to make abortion training mandatory for all New York City medical students. At that time, many students opted to take advantage of a “conscience clause,” and still others declined to offer the procedure even though they had been well trained in it.

Not everybody agrees with the latest measure. One conservative agitator, who asked to remain anonymous, citing “fear for my family,” says, “This is why I believe that people on the Left know they are wrong. Rather than offer scholarships to like-minded med-students or campaign to encourage women to patronize certain doctors, they’d rather just force the medical profession to acquiesce to their pro-choice demands.”

“I was in the first class that was no longer allowed to choose not to participate in abortion training,” says Dr. Christian Hashart, referring to the 2007 change in policy to allow only ordained religious medical students to opt out of mandatory abortion studies. “Frankly, I’ve tried to talk more than a few women out of aborting their children,” he says.

Dr. Hashart is especially concerned about the infringement on patients’ privacy once a Quality Inspector must be present during all of his patient-doctor consultations. Ms. Quillit justifies the move, saying, “It can be very harmful to women to hear an opinion from a respected doctor that is contrary to their own choice.”

Safety is the central concern, according to the Abortion Quality Inspector General, Frank Lee Hitmynn. “We require all firearms to be turned in before Quality Inspectors leave the premises. We also require that all weapons be visible throughout the course of the day to make sure that the doctors don’t get any funny ideas.”

## In Cahoots

07/15/02

Julianne Entley responded, “How kind of you to ask, Thad. Yes, he’s feeling much better, thank you.”

Thad shielded his eyes so he could see his neighbor’s face in the glare of the rising sun. She was smiling, he thought. “I’ve been praying for him. I hope your father recovers quickly.”

“We all do. Well, I’m really in a hurry this morning,” Mrs. Entley explained and began walking down the street.

Picking up the newspaper from his driveway, Thad squinted and watched Mrs. Entley direct her dog straight through the intersection. *Strange — she turns left when she’s in a hurry.* He supposed she must have intended to take the straight route to go past the little convenience store and had to cut their conversation short to get home reasonably quickly despite the longer walk.

Thad’s commute to work was, as usual, fraught with traffic, but he didn’t mind. With the windows open and the radio playing softly, his mind wafted along the highway like the summer breeze that ruffled his hair and fiddled with his tie.

The receptionist gave him her perfunctory smile when he entered the lobby. “How are you this fine morning, Cassie?” Thad asked. As gorgeous as she was, he had never given serious consideration to seeking more than her pleasant hellos and some light conversation.

“Glad it’s Friday.”

“It’s not much like Friday for me. Richard is late with the quarterly, so I’ve got to drive it into the city this evening after work.”

“He told me about that,” she said apathetically.

“I guess he ran into some trouble, and somebody’s got to make sure it gets there to be processed by Monday. It’s nice weather for a drive. Anyway, I should be home in time to watch my favorite television show before I go to bed. So, what are you doing tonight?”

Cassie explained, flustered, “Oh, I have too much to do around the house to go out.” Then her phone rang, and she answered it.

The morning passed quickly, and even the gray cubicle walls couldn’t sap Thad’s good mood. The plant that he had recently placed on his desk seemed about to bloom in response to the fluorescent lights, and Thad shared greetings that were heartier than usual, even for him, when he passed his coworkers in the hall.

He offered a broad smile to one such coworker next to whom he stood on line to pay for his lunch in the cafeteria. “How’s your day going, Guy?” he asked.

Guy seemed to debate whether he had heard somebody speaking to him. When he decided that he had, he replied, “A lot of work to get done... you know, Friday and all. In fact, I’ve got to bring my lunch back to my office.”

Pointing to the tray that Guy carried, Thad told him, “They won’t like you taking that out of the dining area.”

Guy blushed. “Oh. Yeah. I guess I better get a Styrofoam container. Excuse me.”

With a nod as Guy stepped out of line, Thad turned his smile to the girl behind the register.

After a peaceful lunch spent watching some birds playing in the sky outside the cafeteria window, Thad returned to his cubicle with a thoughtful stride. For no particular reason, he had a sense of an undercurrent of something special, or at least different.

Shortly before closing time, Richard’s impatient knock on the cubicle doorway roused Thad from his work. “Here’s the report. I know I promised to get it to you earlier, but I got held up. Thanks for driving it into the city. Sorry you won’t be able to make it to the party.”

Taking the package from Richard, Thad asked, "What party?" Richard shuffled his feet. "Ummm. Actually, it's just a little get-together."

"I guess the news must have missed me."

"Well, we've all been so busy, maybe it slipped Cassie's mind."

"Cassie? She told me she had house chores to do."

With a quick look to his shoes, Richard said, "Maybe she meant she had to do them before she left. Hey, it looks like your plant's dying."

It took Thad a moment to follow the shift in topic. "I think it's growing."

"Might just be looking for light. Thanks again for delivering the report." And Richard was gone.

Thad's errand went more quickly than he had expected. Most of the traffic was headed out of the city during rush hour and toward its restaurants and nightlife when Thad was on his way home. He listened to a new CD twice but hardly heard it because his thoughts were elsewhere, pondering why everybody had been acting so strangely. After all, he'd already had something that would occupy most of his evening, and he didn't much like to go out late anyway. He couldn't imagine that they'd worry he'd feel slighted if he weren't invited somewhere, and he certainly wouldn't have wanted to impose himself on anybody's plans.

The sun was setting when Thad pulled into his driveway and walked down it to check his mailbox. Mrs. Entley was passing by, apparently for an evening stroll. "Hello, Thad."

"Hello, Mrs. Entley. Out enjoying the dusk?"

The evening's light gave her face a reddish hue and deepened its shadows — secretive. "Yes. Well, I'll be seeing you."

Thad nodded but wanted to ask her something. "Mrs. Entley."

She continued for a couple paces, and Thad was about to call out a little more loudly when she stopped and turned halfway toward him. "Yes?"

"You don't know anything about a surprise party, do you?"

"For whom?" Her tone was ambiguous; Thad thought he could make out a slight twitch of a smile on her lips.

He squinted a bit and glanced downward.

“I’m sorry, Thad. I didn’t even know it was your birthday.”

“It’s not.”

“Then why would anybody throw you a surprise party?”

“I don’t know. I thought they’d find a reason.”

Mrs. Entley shook her head in response and walked straight through the intersection.

## Quantum Morality

07/22/02

On the advice of a friend, I will be reading *The Physics of Immortality* by physicist Frank J. Tipler in the near future.<sup>1</sup> From what I've gathered based on the book's preface and table of contents, Tipler addresses the "Omega Point Theory," which speaks to the point at which the science of physics reaches God. Although I have yet to read the book, considering the personal concern that I have for its subject matter, I thought it prudent to gather my own ideas before accepting the new arguments — to define the angle from which I will approach the ideas and develop a sense of the questions that I want answered.

An amazing assertion that Tipler uses as a chapter title within his conclusion section is that "Theology and Religion Are Branches of Science, Not Branches of Ethics." The immediate implication of the "branch" metaphor is that theology represents a narrower focus under the broader rubric of science, with emphasis on mechanical processes and physical truths. The study of ethics, on the other hand, attempts to explain behavior from the other direction — what *ought to be done* rather than *what causes something to be done*. Certainly theology and religion involve both the processes of reality (God's actual creation) and the intended uses of that reality (God's will). Since the "tree" itself must provide access to each "branch," both science and ethics are more properly seen as branches of theology.

However, the "tree of knowledge" model — let alone separate trees — is hardly appropriate because a tree can lose a limb without other limbs being affected. Science without ethics can

become a monstrous tool; ethics without science can become arbitrary commandments. Tipler cedes the necessity of a unified understanding when he states that “the central claims of Judeo-Christian theology are in fact true [and] are straightforward deductions of the laws of physics as we now understand them.” (ix). If this statement is true, how did the ancients get it right with their limited understanding of physics? I believe the answer to be that they drew from another “dimension” of reality that physics cannot touch: emotional *experience* of reality.

Perhaps we find it difficult to intertwine morality and mechanics because we have no “scientific” language with which to discuss emotions in the same way we once had no mathematical language with which to discuss the physical universe. We can examine chemicals in the brain, as we can discuss chord structures in music, but these studies cannot make the leap to actually explaining what, how, or why we feel, which is a fluid subject of essences. In short, we are still acting in the emotional dimension similarly to how pre-Newtonian carpenters acted in the physical dimension; they intuited the laws of physics as we now intuit the ethical laws of emotion.

This relates to another chapter title that jumped out at me: “The Omega Point Is (Probably) Not a Triune Deity.” I believe that physics, as we currently understand the science, could not possibly reveal the triune nature of God to Tipler just as it cannot explain to him why he enjoys Beethoven’s 9th, the Three Stooges, or chocolate ice cream (if he indeed likes any of these). In the same way that we are triune, so is He in whose image we were created. To vastly oversimplify, one can align human intellect, emotion, and action respectively with the Father, Holy Spirit, and Jesus. They are all one as we are each one, the difference is in what capacity we are acting or, in the case of God, in what capacity we approach Him.

To my mind, physicists err in that they acknowledge only their specific approach, while aspects of reality transpire in dimensions into which their language cannot reach. In an endnote to the preface, Tipler agrees with Steven Weinberg, a Nobel-

prize-winning physicist, who says, “At least the [religious fundamentalists] like the scientists tell you that they believe in what they believe in because it is true, rather than because it makes them good or happy[, which is the tendency of religious liberals].” (340). The fault of both scientists and fundamentalists is that they are, in a sense, elitist (“arrogant,” as Tipler admits [xiii]). A person is either simply chosen, as a chosen people or through the gift of technical intelligence, or self chooses, by mastering a body of knowledge and practicing prescribed behaviors. Religious liberals, on the other hand, fail in that they too easily switch the proper direction of belief in a feel-good, do-anything quest. In other words, they look to their impulses to define spirituality instead of looking to spirituality to refine their impulses.

This is where science unhinged from ethics and emotions unhinged from mutual, constant reality begin to have dangerous implications. What all of these groups fail to see in ecumenical theology (that is liberal, but short of libertine) is the suggestion that the multidimensional aspect of God and humanity explains why humans are all equal regardless of intelligence or any other quality. From the least bright to the most brilliant, we can all understand reality and God, albeit with different languages. It does not take a Ph.D. in physics to intuit emotional reality — or even physical and social reality — to the extent that we act in it.

Any truly comprehensive “theory of everything” would have to take into account emotions and the experience of reality. It follows that reality is the perfect expression of itself, and equations, while useful, should never be more than limited pieces of evidence of what to believe. Here Saint Paul has offered direction many centuries before it was necessary to grapple with abstract physics: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is — his good, pleasing, and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2).

The ability to intuit the existence and will of God at any level of intelligence, from any angle of approach, is the importance,

brilliance, and burden of the gift of love. However, at every level, people must *choose* to love and *choose* to believe, whether based simply on awe of a sunset or on the possibilities of a theory in physics.

1. Tipler, Frank J., *The Physics of Immortality* (Anchor Books, 1994)

# Money and Politics: So What's the Point?

07/29/02

To do our part for the economy, my wife and I went out and bought a new car. Actually, it wasn't so much patriotism and altruism as incentives and need. The dealer offered to forget the last few months of our existing lease if we bought or leased a new vehicle, and the manufacturer is offering 0% financing. Adding the fact that I've accumulated enough "points" on my special credit card to offset most of the sales tax, we simply had no reason to continue trying to squeeze our family-sized lives into a two-door coupe.

Unfortunately, this will likely be the last car that we purchase from a local salesman with whom I'd hoped to cultivate a longer-term relationship. He plans to retire in three years, although he commented that if his 401K continues to shrink, he might have to stay on the job long enough for us to catch him one more time. Then he referred, in an astonished voice, to Dick Cheney's \$20 million Halliburton divestiture profit in 2000.

I prepared for the partisan debate.

Perhaps for no other reason than that he was about to receive some of my money, the car salesman didn't argue too vehemently. He conceded — qualified with a "but still" — that Cheney gave \$4 million away (actually, \$7.8 million in stock options). The VP also paid \$14 million in taxes at the end of that year. But the real argument-ender for either side in such debates is something in the family of "they all do it." Anybody with the desire to memorize numbers and statistics would be able to rattle off the list of big-money and/or questionable financial dealings among

the top ranks of either party. I didn't need to trot out any of the Democrats' figures. My car salesman was willing to admit that Cheney probably hadn't done anything illegal and that many in the political class do the same — or worse.

“But still.” The numbers are just staggering; that's really the point. In a political context, it may be unfair that the press seems more willing and able to persuade the public to take the general inequity out specifically on Republicans, but it is the sheer size of the numbers that matters. The partisan “unfairness” for debate purposes is almost silly in discussion between two middle-class folks such as myself and the salesman. In a cosmic sense, it is plainly unfair that any one family should earn in a year enough to support twenty families for twenty years. However, the specifics of earning, deserving, and fairness become ideological and difficult to handle, particularly away from the edges.

I believe it to be unfair that my rent probably pays not only my landlord's mortgage for the property on which I live, but also a huge chunk of the payments for his own home. As the car dealer and other older citizens of our island community have advised me, local real estate is among the best investments one can make. We've offered to buy this house, and our landlord has declined. However, if he hadn't bought it many years ago or decided to rent it out while he moved temporarily out of state, I wouldn't be living here. There's also no basis for my claiming that I deserve the good investment that the property represents and he doesn't. Furthermore, I can see that, in his position, even the most kindly landlord would choose to hang on to the house. He wants to move back in five or so years, and local real estate is such that he mightn't find a suitable place to live at that time. And beyond the income of the direct rent payment each month, we're keeping the house “warm,” and he gets a tax break.

Of course, I can also see that, from our point of view, the arrangement just isn't fair. Our huge rent payment disappears into the world rather than helping us to climb out of the financial hole that we began digging in college, let alone working toward

“building a future.” Every spring, the government wallops us with a few grand in taxes due, and nothing but sheds is available in our area in our price range.

But there’s a silver lining. If we work hard and save, we will be able to advance. Perhaps one day, we’ll find ourselves in as advantageous a position as our landlord currently holds. We wouldn’t want to have created a system in which our land could be redistributed based on somebody else’s perception of “fairness.”

While comparison of extremes (on which politicians tend to build platforms) reveals inequity, the best system for all, overall, is one in which each family can earn and keep what it’s earned. Of course, ethical structures ought to be in place, such as those that derive from religious practices, to decrease the extent to which extremes of wealth come at the expense of extremes of poverty. However, where government is concerned, charity ought to be, well, charity.

Allowing systematic unfairness to become an emotional collar with which any one political group can lead the public not only creates an “if it ain’t illegal, it ain’t wrong” atmosphere, but it also enables ostensible advocates to distract from areas of their own self-interested concern. The latest hard-to-find eye-catcher for me was that the Clintons, after a year of multimillion-dollar book advances and lucrative speaking gigs, are seeking several million in taxpayer reimbursement for Whitewater legal fees.

Even given my relatively low income, I still probably make enough to support twenty families for twenty years somewhere in the world. The car salesman may have to postpone his retirement, but some people never have the opportunity to stop working. We also have a responsibility to make the world a better place. We do it, to an extent, by working to improve the standing of our own children. We also do it by remembering — and reminding — that happiness and worth are not determined by money alone, either having it or not having it.

## A Bright Future for Revolution, Part 3

08/05/02

I may be odd in this respect (among others), but sometimes I fantasize about being on television debate shows. Don't misunderstand my sense of myself: I'd likely be eaten alive among folks who are well trained to speak quickly and memorably. *The Thirty-Second Save the World Manual*. But as with game shows, when the clock isn't ticking in your ear and the debating adversary isn't doing his or her best to make you look like a fool on national television, the answers come so easily. The cracks in logic might as well be as long as commercial breaks.

Now imagine that you could stroll over to your computer, press a few keys, and instantly be telling Bill O'Reilly, right there on TV, why, even though you largely agree with his conclusion, his reasoning is just dreadful. Well, that's not possible — and probably never will be.

That “never will be,” however, has more to do with the choices of people with the spotlight than with technology. Most talk shows and television news programs screen their guests, and hosts manipulate conversation. Newspapers, with their Letters to the Editor sections, are a little better, but very few letters are chosen from among very many submissions (for larger-circulation papers). In essence, this allows the editorial-page editor to construct debates of sorts.

Then there's talk radio. Of course, calls are screened, and the host, beyond the leverage of his or her position, can turn down or simply cut off callers. The variations here are huge — from Rush Limbaugh, who takes only a few calls and has many from which

to choose, to local hosts in small cities, who take almost all calls and will speak with one caller until another light appears on the control panel or the caller gets out of hand.

On this principle, but even more accessible, is the latest version of public discourse: the blog. *Blog* is short for *Web log*, which is essentially a frequently updated series of relatively short ideas, observations, or other writings or images on a Web page. I call the variation that is most aligned with debate and discourse “perpetual punditry.” At its most closed, that’s exactly what the blog is: a running opinion column touching on many topics quickly. One such blog is *National Review Online’s* “The Corner.”<sup>1</sup> Each of the magazine’s regular columnists has the capability to post blog entries, but debate among them, with the occasional citation of readers’ email, is about as far into openness as the site goes.

One of the most famous blogs goes a step further. Andrew Sullivan encourages email and maintains a page of those he chooses to share.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this strategy, as with a Letters to the Editor section, leaves the sneaking suspicion that Mr. Sullivan mightn’t always decide to share the most insightful letters in opposition to himself, and I’ve read many people who disagree with the pundit on specific issues complain of this possibility. The accusation is perhaps more acute because, unlike a newspaper, Mr. Sullivan’s Web site represents him alone, and he alone makes the decisions.

The most open form of blog is that used on Mark Shea’s “Catholic and Enjoying It.”<sup>3</sup> Each of Mr. Shea’s entries is accompanied by a section to which readers can post comments directly and without censorship. (Of course, Web managers can, upon noticing them, delete comments that are unacceptable.) A well-known blogkeeper can attract written debate that rivals that between many professional opinion writers.

But even without a renowned personage deigning to trust the average reader to reach his or her audience with comments, the Blog Universe still represents an amazingly open forum. Certain Web sites, such as Blogspot,<sup>4</sup> offer basic Web log functionality for

no cost whatsoever. Other Web sites, such as Greymatter, offer free software to enable blogs on preexisting Web sites.<sup>5</sup> Literally anybody with some basic computer skills and some time can become a blogger.

With a maze of links, thousands of voices can engage each other in discussion. With no managers, publishers, or senior editors picking and choosing among equally qualified — or well-connected — letter writers or even columnists, those writers with the most wisdom (or, I guess, entertainment value) are free to rise. Those with interesting things to say will attract readers continually, expanding their audiences by word of blog.

Such is my modest hope for my own brand-new Web log. Perhaps given my relative conservatism, by modern standards, and my penchant for democratic “revolution,” I should have called my blog something paradoxical and arrogant along the lines of “The Pragmatic Visionary.” Instead, I named it “Dust in the Light.”<sup>6</sup> The title comes from a novel in poetry that I’m writing, and I will leave the curious reader wondering until such time as I’ve published the book in the old-fashioned way. But the image seems appropriate for a blog — free to float in and out of the spotlight, perhaps drifting to the dusky floor, perhaps catching in the throat of a bloviating speaker.

1. [www.nationalreview.com/thecorner/corner.asp](http://www.nationalreview.com/thecorner/corner.asp)
2. [www.andrewsullivan.com](http://www.andrewsullivan.com)
3. [markshea.blogspot.com](http://markshea.blogspot.com)
4. [www.blogspot.com](http://www.blogspot.com)
5. [www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/](http://www.noahgrey.com/greysoft/)
6. [www.timshelarts.com/dustinthelight](http://www.timshelarts.com/dustinthelight)

## A Conversion... of Sorts

08/12/02

I've been asked about my "conversion story." My standard line has been that I wouldn't know where to begin it and it certainly hasn't ended. The best I've been able to do is promise to write, one day, something along the lines of Thomas Merton's book *Seven Story Mountain*. Part of my problem is that I did not have a St. Paul conversion. No light, no voice, no vision, and no obvious miracle. However, I suspect such conversions are the exception, not the rule.

Another part of my problem is that I came from, pretty literally, an absence of faith. I wasn't even a faithful atheist. Through most of my childhood and teen years, I believed in a vague fate — a sort of faith in meaning and that things would work out because... well, because they ought to. By the time I'd graduated college, I was a self-avowed atheist who opted not to think about from where, exactly, I drew my confidence in there being objective meaning. Thoughts of death were quickly submerged. And I had translated my faith that things would work out into a rational equation based on an honest evaluation of my abilities and a logically constructed map of society. This last sentence means that I came to be convinced that I would succeed based on my intellect.

Whether it was that I hadn't thought or that I had thought too much, I hadn't really developed a resolved and felt belief system against which to measure a new one. I've heard of Protestant ministers becoming Catholic based on affection for Mary as a religious figure. Jews may find that Christ *was* the true messiah.

Muslims may learn that Mohammed did not point as true a way to God as Christ had before him. Devoted atheists may realize that their anti-faith is really only an inverted religion.

I had none of these perspectives, so I'd be hard-pressed to say what it is, exactly, that I converted *from*. My well-worn joke is "Orthodox Intellectualism," and perhaps that does catch something of the sense. Intellectuals, be they socially or scientifically concerned, build up the processes of thinking and understanding to such an extent that they often lose sight of what it is they are trying to understand. When this happens, the processes — the tools of the intellect — become the focus of faith. "My intellect destines me to succeed"; "My scientific understanding gives me the key to understanding all of reality."

There isn't much that will bring such people around to faith except the persistent urge to look straight into the void that they have postulated. This could drive one crazy. Worst of all, taking the leap of faith into that void means *falling* — by every standard that one has followed. To those left behind, it isn't trust that spurs others to jump, but an irrational fear of building higher — or, as they'll snicker, just an inability to do so. And building is done not out of faith that the answers that we seek are there, but because the processes of thinking and science can never reach their goal, and so they will always demand new levels, new stages, new theories. Once I'd fallen, and once I'd pulled through that purgatory of doubt, in which one cannot go back but is afraid to go forward for fear that there is only a bottom to reach after all, and had come out into the world of faith, I realized that the intellectuals are not building; they're digging.

Myself, I hadn't had much choice but to jump; this is my miracle, I suppose — that false hope was removed from my view. The academic world, it seemed, locked me out. I was not scooped into the upper echelons of a company. And my novel did not instantly transport me to the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*. I didn't even see the promise of these events in the future. Despite all of my work — and intelligence — I found myself in a doorless corridor. Furthermore, I realized that there

was no palpable substance to the ideals in which I'd put all of my faith, and that left only monotony, hopelessness, meaninglessness, and death.

I have hesitated to tell my "conversion story" because it is so wide open to atheist — even the faint voice of the atheist in me — attacks of "you believe in God because you want to." Beyond the arguments that my desire to believe in God has no bearing on His objective reality and that my feeling of lack without God is evidence *for* His existence, the fact is that I'm still a highly skeptical and logical person. I've been able to come to see the truth of God because I opened myself to the arguments and the evidence. I've never accepted something that I could not believe just because I wanted to believe in the Being that others say is behind acceptance.

I wasn't *lucky* enough to require only instructions, and I use the word "luck" seriously. All roads lead to God; blessed are those who have the faith to take the direct one. Me, I need paths and shortcuts and curves and caves and hills. But here's the beauty and truth of the Catholic Church: it can lead us down all of these roads. It will instruct, but it will listen. Christ performed physical miracles, but they were symbolic as well. It will put revelation in the simplest of terms, but if you want to seek and find for yourself, it will merely suggest that you seek and find within yourself, allowing revelation to happen.

This realization, though not where my conversion began, was the spot at which I stepped from the shadows and saw the world right side up.

## But Still... Media Evidence Against Steven Hatfill

08/19/02

Surely, profilers and other investigative personnel have stood before the Trenton mailbox through which some of the anthrax letters began their journey into the history books and tried to picture the person who sent the letters — to see through his eyes. Many writers have tried to do the same. A hypothesis that surfaced soon after the letters began appearing in the news was that the perpetrator was a white male right-wing extremist. In other words, Steven Hatfill was a prime suspect probably before he was a “person of interest.” At least, he’s been made to fit the profile, guilty or not.

Nicholas Kristof of *The New York Times* identifies “Mr. Z,” against whom he has been gathering evidence for months, as Dr. Hatfill in a recent column,<sup>1</sup> offering this qualifier:

The first thing to say is that the presumption of innocence has already been maimed since 9/11 for foreign Muslims, and it should not be similarly cheapened with respect to Dr. Hatfill. It must be a genuine assumption that he is an innocent man caught in a nightmare. There is not a shred of traditional physical evidence linking him to the attacks.

Still...

That said — and the reader reminded that we must erase from our minds observations of current events that might increase suspicion of Muslims — Kristof continues making his

case against Dr. Hatfill. Three anonymously admitted reasons for inspectors' interest in Dr. Hatfill have been broadly disseminated as pieces of evidence and merit closer scrutiny; Kristof also makes some less common claims.

The first frequently cited fact is that the letters to Senators Daschle and Leahy had return addresses of a nonexistent "Greendale School," and according to *The Associated Press*:<sup>2</sup>

Hatfill once lived in Harare, Zimbabwe, where there is a school known as Greendale School. That school is actually named for Courtney Selous, the namesake of the Selous Scouts, who fought for white rule in what was then called Rhodesia. Hatfill has said he fought with the Selous Scouts.

This evidence, while a potentially interesting detail on top of other indicators, is pretty shaky in conjunction with the little that is known. While it is possible that an adult, single male from a foreign country would know the name of a local primary school, it is hardly certain. It is even less certain that such a visitor would know an official, but unused, name.

The tidbit that probably makes this evidence important in the eyes of the media is the link to Hatfill's supposed service with the Selous Scouts, to which *The New York Times* regularly refers as the "armed forces of a white racist government." Actually, the Selous Scouts were an elite group of famously tough soldiers who specialized in counter-terrorism — hunting down revolutionaries on their home turf and defending *an incumbent government*, a fact that is rendered ambiguous in the AP story with the phrase "fought for white rule." Whether one agrees with the activities of the Scouts or not, the introduction of the racism specter — especially since nobody is accusing Hatfill of having racist intentions and since he may have exaggerated his involvement with the group, anyway — is gratuitous.

The next thing that makes the FBI go "hmm" is a bioterrorism-related novel, featuring an attack on Congress, on Hatfill's computer. However, the book, *Emergence*, involves

neither anthrax nor the mail and has been lingering in the copyright office since 1998. Even were somebody willing to argue that Hatfill used anthrax and mail in order to cover the monumental stupidity of copyrighting his terrorist plots, a *more suspicious* character would be a bioterror scientist who has never contemplated writing such a book. Indeed, Hatfill's story line was conceived when a party of former military personnel and journalists discussed the topic.

The last prevalent suspicious factoid is that, in 1999, Hatfill and another scientist commissioned a report on "how anthrax might be sent through the mail" for SAIC, a private company. The amount of anthrax in each of the recent letters (2.5 grams) matched the predictions in the report. According to *U.S. News & World Report*,<sup>3</sup> SAIC spokesperson Ben Haddad clarified that "the report has been 'misconstrued' and 'is not about sending anthrax through the mail.' Most of it dealt with decontamination after large attacks." Furthermore, a scientific study meant to predict scenarios would be next to useless if it weren't able to successfully describe likely strategies.

In addition to these three reasons for "interest" in Dr. Hatfill are many speculations. Obviously, he has a background in work related to bioterrorism, but this does not make him unique among those whom the FBI is investigating. While Kristof refers to an "animus to some federal agencies that shows up in his private writings," I have been unable to find any such writings except in descriptions of *Emergence's* plot. Perhaps Hatfill was upset at losing security clearance last August, but apparently nothing he has written or said with respect to that incident has been sufficiently inflammatory to merit broad reportage.

However, the rejection (perhaps by the CIA) of his application for Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmentalized Information (TS/SCI) clearance is related to another statement of Kristof's: that Hatfill "has also failed three successive polygraph examinations since January." Some reports allege that rejection of Hatfill's security clearance application was based on a failed polygraph test, specifically around his experiences in Africa. However, the single

polygraph that Hatfill is widely reported to have taken since January both Hatfill and other sources claim he passed.

Kristof relies heavily on “the only physical evidence”: that bloodhounds that had sniffed the letters reacted strongly to Hatfill and to places that he had been. However, all stories of this reaction seem to derive from an August 12 *Newsweek* article that based its own account on a discussion with “a law-enforcement official.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, this *Newsweek* article and Kristof’s own *op-ed* columns apparently constitute the basis for much of the reporting about the more speculative aspects of Hatfill’s case.

For those with a penchant for deductive reasoning, one last bit of information, cited by Kristof, could prove interesting. It involves a “hoax letter with intriguing parallels to the real one... sent to Senator Tom Daschle from London in mid-November, when Dr. Hatfill was visiting a biodefense center in England.” Hatfill denies that he went to London during his stay, and it would certainly go beyond *Newsweek’s* characterization of him as “flamboyant and arrogant” to risk a hoax mailing if he sent the real anthrax. But it *is* curious that such a letter would be mailed concurrently with the U.N.-sponsored biodefense training session that Hatfill was attending.

Based on this final “coincidence,” and since speculation seems to be the order of the day, I thought I’d float an idea: what if somebody with limited understanding of what constitutes “evidence” in the United States legal system targeted Dr. Hatfill as ripe to be framed? Of course, it is highly unlikely that such a person would have been a member of the media. Still...

1. Kristof, Nicholas D. “The Anthrax Files.” *The New York Times* 13 August 2002
2. Bridis, Ted “Official says no physical evidence links anthrax to Hatfill.” *The Associated Press* 13 August 2002
3. Boyce, Nell, et al. “Circle of Suspicion.” *U.S. News & World Report* 26 August 2002
4. Miller, Mark, and Daniel Klaidman “The Hunt for the Anthrax Killer.” *Newsweek* 12 August 2002

## Address the Scandal Thoroughly, but Quickly

08/26/02

The infamous eleven minutes of anti-Catholicism on Opie and Anthony's New York radio show have pushed me into a more decisive stance regarding the Church's current scandal. Listening to degenerates who encouraged a man *on parole* to defile a holy place on a holy day claim the moral high ground, listening to their on-the-scene producer tell a St. Patrick's usher that he is supporting pedophilia by remaining a Catholic, I became convinced that a drawn-out resolution to the scandal would unnecessarily protract the suffering of all Catholics.

There has been quite a bit of argument in Catholic writers' circles around the hierarchy's activities of late. Rod Dreher voices a sentiment that is probably common among American Catholics in his *Wall Street Journal* essay, "The Pope Has Let Us Down."<sup>1</sup> I empathize with his frustration, but I also agree with others, such as Mark Shea, that the "zero tolerance" policy proposal from the bishops was a copout response.

While civil authorities may find that expedience and deferred culpability outweigh the justice of human judgment, the Catholic Church must hold itself to a higher standard of compassion and belief in repentance and reconciliation. A policy that would handle a priest who gave a backrub to a teenager in the sixties in the same manner as a sexual predator abdicates bishops' responsibilities to an inhuman mechanism and increases the weight of false accusations.

I also agree with writers who suggest that a Christian solution would force — rather, *allow* — the pedophiles' facilitators to

make amends and work to repair the damage that they have done. On the other hand, the position of bishop or, more so, cardinal demands a dignity and moral authority that such facilitators no longer have. It also endows a degree of privilege and reverence that they no longer deserve.

So, while I understand the need to prove that the Church takes the evils that have been done seriously, I also believe that it must strive to resist being swayed by public sentiment beyond the bounds of its teachings. While the Church should not be used as a shield against civil law, it must also maintain its own — higher — standard of judgment. Those who govern the Church are not in an easy position, but neither are they facing decisions for which their religion does not prepare them nor repercussions for which their faith should not steel them.

I would not presume to dictate how these demands should be met, but I will humbly offer a suggested scenario. The Pope should demote all facilitator bishops and priests to positions with limited authority, from which their primary activity will be ushering the Church through this difficult time — atoning and rebuilding the institutional credibility that they compromised. Those who choose to resign, instead, should be required to do so without severance or any other benefit that will ameliorate their attempts to build lives based on their tarnished reputations.

Accused priests should be investigated and judged in accordance with a set of standards, including due process, determined by a council of members of both the hierarchy and the laity. The truly evil monsters, the sexual predators, should be excommunicated — cast out from the Church and handed over to civil authorities. Those found plausibly innocent should be returned to service, but with the incident thoroughly and fairly noted.

Between the extremes, perhaps offenders could be sent to a special penitential monastery. One interesting suggestion that I've heard involves the creation of a new monastic order to watch over the offenders as they repent and labor; perhaps this order could count the demoted bishops and other facilitators among its

first members. Another possible component to the new monastery, depending on the issues raised during the establishment of new policies, would be civil authorities acting in an advisory capacity.

In the worst cases that fall short of excommunication, the priests would be relegated to the new monastery for life. In lesser cases, perhaps they could shift to the order of “watchers,” with some mobility outside of the facility. In mild cases, it might even be allowable for priests to transfer to other monasteries over time, although dealing with children should always be out of the question. In a general sense, specifically Catholic punishment may, in some cases, be perceived as lighter than the civil alternatives, but it would seem harsher in others.

Since the scandal exists within a religion, public perception should not be the central concern, but neither should it be ignored. While few will mistake Opie and Anthony’s comments for anything other than the ridiculous trash that they were, milder, but similar, sentiments are all around. However, even the most divine policy for the Church’s future will not satisfy those who wish not to be satisfied. The central concerns should be the Church itself and Catholics themselves, and decisive, *Christian* action would be invaluable toward maintaining Catholics’ faith. We will bear our cross, but the prolongation of that burden is unnecessary and imprudent in a world in which faith is under constant assault.

1. Dreher, Rod “The Pope Has Let Us Down.” *Wall Street Journal*  
20 August 2002

## Meetings on the Road, III: Inexplicable Carvings

09/02/02

Distracted by the sight of a valley,  
through which a careful carving river wound,  
I hardly heard a voice call out to me,  
“Come see this strange phenomenon I’ve found.”

Beside the road, a man bent at the waist  
was peering through a magnifying glass.  
“Somehow this tree’s smooth skin has been defaced  
to form an oddly patterned bark crevasse.

“If the shape is a feat of molecules,  
a microscope would surely show its cause.  
But I would say we’ve yet to build the tools  
to investigate such peculiar flaws.”

I saw it was a heart around a “U”  
and vainly pled he take a broader view.

## The Heart Is Always More

09/09/02

**T**odd Ouida was born on my first birthday. I didn't know him then. I went to a different elementary school, so I didn't know him when he was forced to stop attending as a regular student to grapple with panic attacks for three years. I didn't even really know him when he returned and our two elementary schools fed us both into the River Dell Regional junior and senior high schools, where he became a 5'6" starting defensive back on the varsity football team. I knew *of* him, of course, because we shared a birthday and it was a small school.

Even our small school has had a number of brushes with history. As I recall, there was a plaque by the auditorium with the names and portraits of alumni who had died in Vietnam. I think there were three. The usual understanding of that war being what it has been throughout my entire life, such memorials have always seemed to ask, "See what they did to our community in order to fight their war?" I think it was one of my high school history teachers who related to me that every town lost some of its children.

Of course, memorials ought to be kept as tributes, and I don't mean to dishonor those young men when I suggest that the motivation for etching their names in metal and stone seems to have been to make a statement about unnecessary loss rather than about accomplishment. They were heroes all, but the Vietnam War Memorial's emphasis on names rather than representations confirms that, in the words of the National Park

Service's official Web site, "The purpose of this memorial is to separate the issue of the sacrifices of the veterans from the U.S. policy in the war."

Sacrifices. It seems that the quickness with which we commemorate the deaths of our citizens corresponds to the degree to which they were sacrifices — victims. The memorial for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing has already been completed, each name etched in its own symbolic chair. The Vietnam Wall predated the Korean War Veterans Memorial, and both came before the World War II Memorial, which isn't slated to be dedicated until 2004, about sixty years after that war ended.

If this trend continues, the September 11 memorial might be finished long before time has granted its designers much historical perspective. Hopefully, it will nonetheless capture the mood of our times. Just as the Vietnam War era marked a tremendous shift in citizens' conception of the United States of America, the Vietnam Memorial's lack of iconography makes quite a different statement than the statues and proclamations of grandeur and confidence that had come before. I think the September 11 memorial ought to make a statement of internal, national reconciliation. Sacrifice *and* confidence. Compassion *and* strength. Personal loss *and* triumph.

I envision a field of stone pillars recalling the World Trade Center towers in a pentagon formation, each about ten feet in height and bearing the names and portraits of those who died. Interspersed, for the visitor to come across while walking among these pillars, would be statues of the various heroes of that day — firemen, policemen, emergency and medical workers, and regular citizens — all in poses corresponding to their activities, helping others. At the center of the field would be a statue of the three firemen raising the U.S. flag, above which a giant sculpture of an eagle would hang, wings spread, from some type of supporting structure.

As for my high school, I don't recall any plaques devoted to alumni casualties of other wars that occurred before I walked the halls, and as far as I know, alumnus Marie Rossi, who died in a

post-ceasefire accident in the Gulf War, has gone without such a tribute. But I think Todd Ouida and Scott Rohner, class of '97, ought to have one. They both worked on the 105th floor of One World Trade Center, which American Airlines Flight 11 hit between the 95th and 103rd floors.

Todd and Scott's memorial ought not be placed with the Vietnam one by the "official" entrance, near the auditorium and administrative offices, but by the common entrance, near the gym and the cafeteria. The two ought to be a reminder that the world is not separate from our lives. Every student at River Dell High School will play a part in history. It is unavoidable. They don't have to go in search of it; they don't even have to be drafted into it. History will come to them, and the implication should be that they ought to live their daily lives heroically and triumphantly, no matter how profound or mundane the sacrifices that they are called upon to make.

(For more information about Todd Ouida, visit The Todd Joseph Ouida Memorial Children's Fund at [www.mybuddytodd.org](http://www.mybuddytodd.org).)

# Inspecting the Inspector and Making the Case, Part 1

09/16/02

I've been tempted to mention, in imitation of the haven't-seen-a-shred-of-evidence people, that I haven't seen a shred of evidence that Saddam is *not* doing everything that every commentator has accused him of. I know that it is even more difficult to prove a negative about a secretive dictatorship than it is to prove a positive about it, but the entire response to what evidence we pro-attack-Iraq folks have produced has been either to deny that a particular nugget exists or to dismiss it outright.

But then I recalled Scott Ritter. Actually, Ritter has made it nigh impossible for me to forget him lately. In fact, his unbelievable quest for fame is one of many qualities about his latest appearances that is on the list of things that Mama always told me indicate somebody who isn't... well... saying the most honest of things. There's the nearly messianic vision of himself and the constant references to his credentials and the utter dismissal of other "experts" and the references to "documented proof" that he never has on hand and the unnatural constraints against discussing major relevant topics and the bickering over minutia... oh, and the fact that he just plain lies.

So, to debunk the one shred of evidence of the would-be debunkers and to play a small role in getting this creepy fellow off my TV screen as expeditiously as possible, I'll be presenting a thorough, multipart Fisking (i.e., a complete disproving, in blogosphere parlance) of Mr. Ritter's 9/12 interview with Fox News's David Asman. The debunking and "descreening" of a kook like Ritter might not seem to be worth so much of my time,

but such a document ought to exist somewhere because the guy is doing his best, with the help of the cable news networks (and the Iraqi government), to spread his nonsense. I also think the project offers justification to collect a number of links to the evidence available to date, showing the necessity of acting against Saddam Hussein's regime. (The transcript of the interview can be found online,<sup>1</sup> but I recommend the streaming video,<sup>2</sup> because the transcript is pretty poor and Ritter's presentation is sort of a continuous self-Fisking.)

Take careful note of this comment early in the interview: "I don't disagree with anything I've ever said. Why in God's name would I disagree with something I've said?" Beyond its defensiveness, this comment is important toward leaving Ritter with no option but to depart from the public light with his head bowed because it leaves him with no wiggle out of what's to follow. Let's jump right in:

Forget those people [who think I'm an apologist for Saddam]. Let's deal with the facts. First of all, it's a matter of perception. When I resigned, I didn't resign as someone beating the drum of war. I'm not out there promoting war.

Here, Ritter dismisses his critics without comment, insists on looking at "the facts," and then proceeds to tell Mr. Asman that the "facts" are all about perception. Yeah, I can see how "perception" would make Ritter's current claims seem different from what he wrote in *The New Republic* in December 1998:<sup>3</sup> "Military strikes carried out for the purpose of enabling a vigorous UNSCOM to carry out its mandate are wholly justifiable." Perhaps that was an instance of the Tambourines of War. As for the sentence about what he's doing now, well, I'll save comment for a more extreme sample later.

Now check out this exchange:

ASMAN: So you think Saddam Hussein still has these chemical weapons capabilities?

RITTER: No, I said Saddam Hussein has the potential of having chemical weapons capability. We haven't completely confirmed the final disposition of these capabilities and they must be of concern. But to say that Saddam Hussein retains chemical weapons — there's a big difference between weapons and capability. [*Umm, Mr. Asman said "capability."*]

...

ASMAN: So he might still have all of those barrels of evil stuff, the biochemical weapons?

RITTER: It's not a matter of "still have," he might have been able to make those weapons in the intervening time. ... first of all, I never said he has them and I'm not saying chances are he has them, I'm saying there's a possibility he could reconstitute this capability and that's why we have to have inspectors in place.

First, Asman quoted Scott to himself at the beginning of the interview as saying, on *Good Morning America* in 1998, "Iraq retains the capability to launch a chemical strike." Second, here's *The Washington Post's* October 1998 description of a 1997 meeting between Ritter and Lt. Gen. Rashid, Iraqi oil minister:<sup>4</sup>

Rashid demanded to know what Ritter thought he was hiding. Ritter replied in detail: VX nerve toxins in salt form for long-term storage; a mobile biological weapons production facility, including fermenters and a drying and grinding apparatus; dried anthrax; five to seven operational ballistic missiles and up to 25 in disassembled form; and possibly a nuclear weapon "minus the core of HEU," or highly enriched uranium that would make it a bomb.

Are these biological agents a "capability" or a "potential for capability," and isn't a "ballistic missile" a weapon? Or did Ritter's team succeed in its final year — the most obstructed — in negating such a long list of particulars more effectively than it had before?

But Ritter moves on to a different, interesting topic with the statement “Don’t disgrace the death of those 3,000 people [killed on 9/11/01] by bringing Iraq into the equation.” Wow! Quite a bold, emotion-grabbing, statement. At this point, I’d like to turn the reins over to David Asman (after all, it was his interview):

ASMAN: We know there are people out there willing to do the dirty deed, and we also know Saddam Hussein has had contacts with these people in the past.

RITTER: No, you don’t know that.

ASMAN: We know from Czech intelligence. Czech intelligence says that an Iraqi met with Mohammed Atta twice.

RITTER: What does the CIA and FBI say? [*Keep this rejoinder in mind for later use.*]

ASMAN: The FBI and CIA say the situation is not clear but Czech intelligence says it is. And why is it that the only person, the only Arab leader that Usama bin Laden likes and approves of and speaks highly of is Saddam Hussein, why?

RITTER: That’s an absurdity, David. Usama bin Laden in 1991 was offering his services to the Saudi government [to] confront Saddam Hussein. Usama bin Laden has issued fatwas against Saddam Hussein. [*A: “absurdity”*]

ASMAN: We talked to representatives of Al Qaeda here in 1998 shortly after the bombings of those embassies in Africa. The only Arab leader — I spoke to them personally — the only Arab leader they were willing to praise, not to condemn, was Saddam Hussein. Why?

RITTER: Well, I’m just telling you that the fact of the matter is the Iraqi government — and I’m not an apologist for the Iraqi government, Saddam Hussein is the most brutal dictator I can think of today and from my lips to God’s ear, I wish he was dead — but the fact

of the matter is Iraq is a secular dictatorship that has struggled against Islamic fundamentalists for 30 years.

ASMAN: Exactly. So why is it that Usama bin Laden supports this secular individual?

RITTER: Well, first of all, I don't think that case has been made. [*B: "I don't think"*]

ASMAN: It's been made not only by Usama bin Laden himself but by representatives of Al Qaeda to me personally on air. We've got the tape. I can show it to you.

RITTER: I'm not disputing that.

ASMAN: You were disputing it.

RITTER: I'm not disputing that people have sat before you and said these things. I'm disputing that Al Qaeda is somehow in allegiance with Saddam Hussein. [*So he's not disputing the proof, just the reality that it is proof of.*]

ASMAN: Why shouldn't they be? They both want the destruction of the United States. You don't think they do? You don't think Usama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein want the destruction of the United States?

RITTER: Let's keep Usama bin Laden out of this equation because I'm not linking them. [*C: "let's keep Usama... out of this"*]

Well, in that case, call off the war... Scott Ritter isn't "linking them." Sounds a bit as if Ritter, like many of the anti-attack-Iraq folks, chooses to simply leave out big chunks of the counterargument that he can't deal with. I've heard this assertion that al Qaeda and Hussein don't mix ideologically before, so let's take a look at it.

At the very least, one can say that bin Laden has changed his position on Hussein. According to MSNBC,<sup>5</sup> "He considered Iraqi

leader Saddam Hussein an ally until Hussein threatened to invade Saudi Arabia.” Subsequently, Saudi Arabia kicked him out, and he moved to the Sudan, which, according, happily, to “Fisking’s” namesake, Robert Fisk,<sup>6</sup> “is [was?] despised by Saudi Arabia for its support of Saddam Hussein.”

Once Saudi Arabia sided with the U.S. against Iraq, bin Laden seems to have had a change of heart. As Eurasianet puts it,<sup>7</sup> “while he did not approve of Saddam Hussein’s 1990 invasion of neighboring Arab Muslim Kuwait, bin Laden — along with millions of other Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere — sided with Saddam as soon as it became clear that the United States would oppose him with force,” which coincided with bin Laden’s big hang-up: U.S. troops accepted on Saudi land.

And let’s not forget Saddam’s conversion. Jeffrey Goldberg wrote of Saddam’s conversion to radical Islam in his famous *New Yorker* article:<sup>8</sup>

“It was gradual, starting the moment he decided on the invasion of Kuwait,” in June of 1990, according to Amatzia Baram, an Iraq expert at the University of Haifa. “His calculation was that he needed people in Iraq and the Arab world—as well as God—to be on his side when he invaded. After he invaded, the Islamic rhetorical style became overwhelming”—so overwhelming, Baram continued, that a radical group in Jordan began calling Saddam “the New Caliph Marching from the East.” This conversion, cynical though it may be, has opened doors to Saddam in the fundamentalist world. He is now a prime supporter of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and of Hamas, paying families of suicide bombers ten thousand dollars in exchange for their sons’ martyrdom. This is part of Saddam’s attempt to harness the power of Islamic extremism and direct it against his enemies.

So, having seen that there’s no reason ideology ought to have been a barrier to al Qaeda/Iraq cooperation, what evidence is there, beyond the Czech intelligence and Mr. Asman’s interview with al Qaeda officials that suggests that Ritter is absurd for unilaterally declaring that he’s “not linking them”?

First, Laurie Mylroie, in her ongoing investigation of Saddam's links to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the Oklahoma City bombing, cites collusion with bin Laden on some of the attacks for which the latter is given credit. An interesting note that will come up again with reference to Ritter's resignation from UNSCOM is this, taken from an April 2001 review of her book in *The Washington Times*:<sup>9</sup> "Miss Mylroie argues that Bill Clinton[, his administration, and the intelligence agencies controlled by it] purposely ignored these leads because he didn't want to deal with Baghdad."

Second, Sabah Khodada, a captain in the Iraqi army from 1982 to 1992, told PBS's *Frontline* that he was sure that Saddam was behind September 11.<sup>10</sup> He elaborated thus:

When we were in Iraq, Saddam said all the time, even during the Gulf War, "We will take our revenge at the proper time." He kept telling the people, "Get ready for our revenge."

We saw people getting trained to hijack airplanes, to put explosives. How could anybody not think this is not done by Saddam? Even the grouping, those groups were divided into five to six people in the group. How about the training on planes? Some of these groups were taken and trained to drive airplanes at the School of Aviation, northern of Baghdad. ... Everything coincides with what's happening.

Third, Goldberg also found Iraqi Kurds making the link to al Qaeda via a sort of terrorist "division":

The stories, which I later checked with experts on the region, seemed at least worth the attention of America and other countries in the West.

The allegations include charges that Ansar al-Islam has received funds directly from Al Qaeda; that the intelligence service of Saddam Hussein has joint control, with Al Qaeda operatives, over Ansar al-Islam;

that Saddam Hussein hosted a senior leader of Al Qaeda in Baghdad in 1992; that a number of Al Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan have been secretly brought into territory controlled by Ansar al-Islam; and that Iraqi intelligence agents smuggled conventional weapons, and possibly even chemical and biological weapons, into Afghanistan. If these charges are true, it would mean that the relationship between Saddam's regime and Al Qaeda is far closer than previously thought.

And fourth, just for flavor, remember ABC News's interview with Saddam's supposed mistress, Parisoula Lampsos:<sup>11</sup>

As U.S. officials look for current links between Saddam and al Qaeda, Lampsos said she was told the Iraqi leader has met and given money in the past to Osama bin Laden, according to one of several written excerpts from the Primetime Thursday broadcast.

Lampsos saw bin Laden at Saddam's palace in the 1980s, she said, and claimed Saddam's son Oday told her his father met with bin Laden again in the mid-1990s and gave him money.

(To be continued.)

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## Inspecting the Inspector and Making the Case, Part 2

09/23/02

RITTER: [Suspicion's] enough for us to be extremely concerned about, but when you want to take action, there has to be justification found in an international law. Let's remember there's two documents every American...<sup>1</sup>

I wish David Asman of Fox News hadn't spoken over Scott Ritter here because I'd love to know what "two documents every American" might know that would have anything to do with a nonexistent "international law." I find myself struggling to even follow Ritter's thought processes, especially considering that President Bush had just spoken to the U.N. to suggest that they act. In fact, this is what Mr. Asman speaks over Ritter to bring up. Ritter, however, tries to find some way to spin Bush as "dictating" rather than "working with the United Nations."

He then mentions "the United States' obligations under the U.N. Charter, which is to go to the Security Council and seek Security Council action." Apart from the fact that this is inherent in the President's suggestion to the U.N., Ritter's own comments on PBS *NewsHour* in 1998 are a direct rebuttal to his current position:<sup>2</sup>

ELIZABETH FARNSWORTH: Mr. Ritter, as you know, this change has been described by some people as tactical, that the secretary of state and others wanted to wait until they had support in the Security Council to move forward with these more confrontational investigations. What's your response to that?

WILLIAM SCOTT RITTER, JR.: This is lunacy. The bottom line is we haven't had—the United States hasn't had this kind of Security Council support for many years now, and Security Council support is eroding, eroding in large part because of a lack of American leadership. I don't know what they're waiting for. The Security Council is on a gradual, even a steep slide downhill in terms of its ability to support, or willingness to support the special commission. And there's no indication that anything the United States has been doing would turn the Security Council around. So I don't know—it sounds an awful lot like an excuse. It seems like it's a strategic pause, because it's been taking place for many years now.

In other words, in 1998, Ritter was for the United States pressuring the Security Council to take the necessary action. Ritter's points here also support Laurie Mylroie's suggestion that a large part of the problem was the Clinton administration's disinclination to take serious action. Earlier in this 1998 interview, Ritter stated, "You had [Security Council Resolution 1154] on the one hand, but on the other hand, [the Clinton] administration's saying, wait a minute, we can't go forward with aggressive inspections because they will lead to a confrontation with Iraq, but let's understand the confrontation is because Iraq will not comply with the law passed by the Security Council."

Turning back to the 2002 interview with Fox News, after some quibbling about whether dictator Saddam Hussein "signed" or merely "signed off on" the resolutions that kept him in power, Ritter responds to Mr. Asman's statement that Iraq accepted "documents saying they would allow U.N. inspectors unfettered access — and they didn't" by claiming:

RITTER: First of all, it's not that black and white. We achieved a 90–95 percent level of disarmament in Iraq. We could not have done that without unfettered access.

I got into the sites I needed to get to. Was it easy? Was it pretty? No. Did I achieve a certain level of

disarmament? Yes. Did other inspectors achieve a certain level of disarmament? Yes. We fundamentally disarmed Iraq and that's the point that has to be made. We succeeded in eliminating the threat posed to the world by Iraq...

That's the funny thing about "fettters" — they make action not "easy" or "pretty." On top of this inherent contradiction, there's his PBS statement, just quoted, that "Iraq will not comply with the law passed by the Security Council." Also in the PBS interview, Ritter made the following comments:

Iraq still has prescribed weapons capability. There needs to be a careful distinction here. Iraq today is challenging the special commission to come up with a weapon and say where is the weapon in Iraq, and yet part of their efforts to conceal their capabilities, I believe, have been to disassemble weapons into various components and to hide these components throughout Iraq. I think the danger right now is that without effective inspections, without effective monitoring, Iraq can in a very short period of time measure the months, reconstitute chemical biological weapons, long-range ballistic missiles to deliver these weapons, and even certain aspects of their nuclear weaponization program.

*Hiding "components" from* hardly constitutes *giving "unfettered access" to*. Moreover, in 1998, Mr. Ritter was apparently far less confident about the degree of disarmament. And remember all the bickering about "capability" versus "weapons"? Well, in this quotation, Ritter argues that part of the deception was in concealing capabilities in such a way as to later facilitate reconstituting weaponry.

The interview with the new, 2002 Ritter goes on:

RITTER: Again, let's put this in the proper perspective. Biological weapons — everybody's concerned about that. Anthrax — we suffered a horrific anthrax attack here in the United States. Iraq produced liquid bulk

anthrax, that's all they ever produced, not the dry powder that we saw here in the United States.

ASMAN: How are you sure about that? You're saying inspectors weren't sure of what happened. How do you know it did?

RITTER: Because this is the finding of the United Nations.

ASMAN: But, Scott, you just said that we're not sure.

RITTER: I'm going to deal with the facts that we know of. I'm not going to get into the hypothetical. What we know is that Iraq only produced liquid bulk anthrax. There is no evidence... *[That's not what he told the Iraqi oil minister in 1997! He seemed to at least have some evidence.]*

ASMAN: I gotta stop you Scott. You just said we don't know that, we don't know that they didn't produce powdered form of anthrax. How do you know? How?

RITTER: No, we do know that they didn't produce powdered form of anthrax. *[How does he know what he didn't know?]* Because we inspected the facility, we did the testing on the facility.

ASMAN: It could not have been a facility you didn't know about?

RITTER: Well, now you're going off the map.

ASMAN: The guy's got trillions of dollars' worth of oil. Couldn't he have within his...

RITTER: Has billions of dollars' worth of oil.

ASMAN: Well, the reserves are trillions of dollars, if you add it up at 25 dollars a barrel. The point is he's got enough cash to do all sorts of things that we don't know about, correct?

RITTER: No. Again, we deal in the world of reality. Weapons of mass destruction aren't pulled out of a black hat like a white rabbit at a magic show. They're produced in factories. There's science and technology involved. They're not produced in a hole in the ground or in a basement. It's an industrial facility, we investigated the industrial facility, anthrax, liquid bulk deteriorates after three years under ideal storage conditions. The last time he produced it, in 1991 — we were there from '91 to '98 and never detected any evidence of production. So for Iraq to have anthrax today they would have had to rebuild these factories since the last time inspectors were there.

ASMAN: 1998. You yourself said it would take six months to rebuild those facilities. So they could have built that. They could have built that four, six times over.

RITTER: They could have.

Well, Mr. Asman is certainly a professional, and he's caught Ritter overextending himself here (and, by definition, acting as an apologist specifically for Saddam). If Mr. Asman had had certain documents on hand, he would have caught Ritter doing more than that. As described in a *Washington Post* article from 1998,<sup>3</sup> in 1997, Ritter had concerns about not only "dried anthrax" but also "a mobile biological weapons production facility, including fermenters and a drying and grinding apparatus."

The bottom line is that we need inspectors in there, we must use force to achieve that, if necessary — and to ensure that Saddam allows them to do their jobs — and what we did know of Iraq's capabilities, weapons... whatever... in 1998 is absolutely irrelevant.

With the following statement to Fox News, Ritter ushers in the Big Lie that he's been pedaling to anybody who'll listen:

RITTER: Yes. Now let's get to the bottom line here. The last time we allowed inspectors into Iraq unconditionally, with unfettered access, what

happened? The United States took these inspectors and used them to spy on Saddam Hussein. ... Richard Butler facilitated American espionage in Iraq. Richard Butler facilitated American manipulation of the inspection process.

The proof? Apparently, four memoranda that Ritter claims to have sent to Butler in the waning days of his employment. He claims that he can “document everything” that he says, but I’ve yet to see him do so. Furthermore, he uses the opportunity to request another appearance on the Fox News “stage” (a curious choice of word, I’d say).

But let’s look at this new scenario that Ritter is putting forth. Butler, knowingly or not, began using the weapons inspections to “insert intelligence capabilities into Iraq... focused on the security of Saddam Hussein and military targets.” Then, as CNN summarized the point of Ritter’s movie,<sup>4</sup> “In Shifting Sands ... the Truth About UNSCOM and the Disarming of Iraq” (funded, largely, by Iraqi-American Shakir Alhafaji), “The United States urged United Nations weapons inspectors in 1998 to deliberately provoke a confrontation with Baghdad to provide political cover for a U.S. bombing campaign.” Next, as Ritter now tells Fox News, “Two days later the United States bombed Iraq using an inspection that was manipulated by the United States as justification for triggering, and using intelligence gathered by the inspectors to bomb Saddam Hussein’s targets that weren’t weapons-of-mass-destruction-related.” After that, well, I guess the U.S. apparently just went back to its sanctions and no-fly zones, making the whole exercise pointless.

This entirely contradicts what news sources (only outside of Iraq, presumably) reported in 1998 as well as what Ritter himself claimed in testimony before the United States Congress. To summarize: After a number of years of weapons inspections, the initiative had degenerated into a charade, consolidated, by *The Washington Post*, in the following scene:

Chief inspector Scott Ritter arrived that day on the first search for clues to Iraq’s illegal arsenal since a crisis

over access to “sensitive” and “presidential” sites had nearly led to war. He and his team drove to a field headquarters of the feared Special Security Organization, or SSO, a complex forbidden to them in the past.

The building went dark in an unexplained power failure, the kind that often marked the arrival of U.N. inspectors. Ritter and his inspection team moved by flashlight from room to room. In each one they found empty shelves, a bare desk and a man with a mustache. One after one, when asked, the men said they worked as marriage registrars.

In response, Ritter formulated the “Shaking the Tree” plan. Because Iraq, a dictatorship, mind you, was using various components of its government, including its intelligence agencies, to hide weapons, “inspectors deliberately triggered Iraq’s defenses against a surprise search and used a new synthesis of intelligence techniques to look and listen as the Baghdad government moved contraband from the site.”

At first, the U.S. acted as the intelligence collector for the plan. At this point, in one of those intricate tales of overlapping espionage, UNSCOM and U.S. intelligence had argued over various instances of questionable cooperation (Ritter even “feuded” with his “counterpart” in the CIA), and tree shaking gave U.S. intelligence information that it then failed to share with UNSCOM, saying there was nothing useful to the disarmament process. Thereafter, the United Kingdom and Israel picked up the intelligence burden, and then, toward the end of the whole inspections episode, it shifted back to the U.S.

This scenario does provide a vague basis for Ritter’s current claims, but previous information, much of it provided by Ritter himself, suggests that events did not occur as he now professes. Intelligence information was gathered, yes, but it was as part of a plan devised by Ritter, and it found its way to, as Ritter told PBS, “any number of governments.”

Furthermore, Ritter’s claim that the United States deliberately triggered Iraqi resistance to justify an attack

contradicts what he told anybody who would listen (from media outlets to Congress) in 1998; *The Washington Post* summarizes: a U.S. “interagency review decided that Washington could no longer support the threat of war to compel UNSCOM’s access to the inner sanctums of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s secret services.” These varying scenarios dramatically shift the direction of the motivation for and, conversely, resistance to intelligence gathering.

This is Ritter’s “Big Lie,” and it is not much different than any of the conspiracy theories that the Middle East Media Research Institute translates into English from the Arab press. Ritter makes a mistake that relates to something that the Arab press apparently does not understand: with a free media — especially with the Internet — the average citizen has access to the type of information that would be classified, or otherwise forbidden, in other countries.

To support his new claim, Ritter finds it necessary to prevaricate, using any rhetorical trick that fits, to cite documents that he has yet to produce (as far as I can tell), and to dismiss other experts (such as Khidhir Abdul Abas Hamza, whom Ritter calls a “fraud”).

*Why* he feels the need to blare and attempt to support such a claim is an interesting question that, pending further information, I’ll leave to conspiracy theorists. I will say that I’m amused by Ritter’s tremendous ego, according to which he alone, “waging peace,” “can defuse a war-like situation that is going to put hundreds of thousands of Americans at risk.” My curiosity is also piqued by his tendency, in recent interviews (particularly the Fox News one in question), to remove Saddam, personally, a step or two from the conflict.

As has likely been said around countless Web logs and watercoolers, I don’t know what they’re paying him, but it’d better be a lot. And I look forward to more information coming out... after Saddam Hussein has been removed from power.

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## Time Has Told Me

09/30/02

I'm growing a bit weary of current events. Not much news has been good or uplifting, and the rest has been more annoying than interesting. So, I thought I'd write this column with the double purpose of relaxing into abstraction and putting current events into perspective. I've been giving a lot of thought to the nature of time, lately.

One difficulty when considering time is that, in order to give it depth, one must deal heavily in perception. Most objective measurements portray time as linear. Things begin, they go forward, and they end. Today was preceded by yesterday and will be followed by tomorrow. Furthermore, what I do tomorrow will not, as far as I can tell, have any effect on what happened yesterday.

Our bodies are locked in the present, and time's effect on them will progress linearly, but our minds are not quite as simplistically snared. We can cast our perception backward into memory. Of course, memory is but shadow; even when we remember so thoroughly that we nearly feel as if we are in the past, we cannot act on that feeling. We cannot change the past, but we can *perceive* it. Looking at it this way, I'd even suggest that we can perceive the future to the degree that we can visualize it.

Certainly, there are extreme limits on the degree to which we can see into the future — so much so that it is much closer to prediction than perception. Nonetheless, for the immediate future, we can nearly envision at least our own actions completely, and this ability expands in time and breadth (outside

of ourselves) in ratio to the amount of information that we have about the past and present. Included in this information is another attribute that I would give to time: time is cyclical.

If I try to picture tomorrow, I can say with certainty that it will be day. Picturing four months from now, I can say that it will be winter, which gives me some predictive power. Of course, the days and years are human conventions, but we've developed them based on our experience of reality. Also of course, these measurements have to do with our position in the universe: the Earth's rotation and revolution around the sun. However, indications are that our solar system is making revolutions around our galaxy, and so on. Indeed, from what I've read, the entire universe is likely in a cycle of expansion and contraction.

If, comparing with all other processes and aspects of nature and reality, it can be said that time is likely a cycle, at some level, perhaps we can model it as a line coiling around to form a tube. What, in our measurements, would constitute a full circumference of this tube is impossible to say, at this point. For simplicity's sake, let's align the model with years. Thus, this September 30, we are on the same side of the coil as we were last year on September 30.

Giving time this shape provides a context in which to consider each year relative to those on either side of it. Again, appealing to perception, I can say that I've never discussed time with anybody who has not told me that each year has seemed shorter than the previous. Similarly, as a general rule, it seems as if broad trends in society tend not only to be cyclical (I've written previously about cycles of clarity/confusion and logic/emotion personally and on a social level) but also to accelerate.

A true model of this acceleration cannot be both comprehensive and simple because each accelerating cycle in nature and society is also individually finite. To broaden the idea into usable simplicity, I appeal to the scientific concept of entropy and the religious concept of last days. Suffice to say that all indications are that time, in any sense that can be relevant to our universe, will end. To capture these joint dynamics —

acceleration and an ending — I propose that the tube model should resemble a vortex, like a whirlpool.

I suppose you'd be justified, having read thus far, asking for some implications for this model. To be honest, I haven't got much to offer. First of all, I said that this was just a distraction from more manageable and comprehensible topics. Second of all, if I attempted to move beyond an abstract model into the realm of conclusions, I might also move beyond the point of pondering and into the realm of the loony, in your estimation.

Nonetheless, I have come up with a few possibilities. My general way of thinking about time suggests some justification for time slowing when we're bored or heavily concentrating and speeding up when we're interested. In the former instance, we're devoting attention to what's happening in connection with what's just happened; in the latter, to what's happening in connection with what's about to happen. These would be like running backwards or forwards on a moving train.

As for time travel, I'd say that I don't see any reason that it ought to be possible. There is potential, I'd say, for somebody who took this entire line of thinking much more seriously than I'm willing to do at this point to combine education and meditation to better perceive the past or even future. Perhaps through devoted practice — or maybe natural ability — that person could actually experience the past or future to a heightened degree. If time travel exists, it might be in this direction.

But my main motivation for thinking this all through, besides breaking away from quotidian matters, was spiritual. God, being eternal, omniscient, and omnipresent, would fill the tube. At the end of time, taking my cue from religious thinking, all of reality would reach God — the "One," the one "Who is." Although I wouldn't presume to speculate about God's perspective, I'd suggest that, as a purely theoretical model, for Him, our vortex would flatten to a disk coiling to the center. I flatten the model in order to suggest that all time is happening simultaneously from God's point of view.

When I was younger, one hang-up I had when considering prayer (which, back then, was little more than a semi-believer's gimmegimme request) was that if I prayed for an envelope to be in my mailbox, the person sending it would have had to respond to my prayer at least a few days earlier. Otherwise, the only valid reality would be mine (i.e., the world isn't happening where I am not). If all time is concurrent, then there is no reason that God could not answer a prayer that I make on Thursday by causing an action on the previous Monday.

This, however, branches into the topic of the extent to which God acts in the world, which is tied up, I believe, with free will. To keep with the model, I would interpret God's will as a wave through the disk of time, with all of us capable of only limited control over our oscillation, having largely to do with the contingencies of our placement in time. But that is a whole other essay for another time that I desire to cast my eyes above our petty, temporal problems.

## Fundamentalism by Any Other Name

10/07/02

In a column titled, “Teaching intelligent design is akin to teaching Holocaust revisionism,” in the October 4, 2002, *Providence Journal*,<sup>1</sup> Alexander Rose expresses the “naïve” belief that “faith and reason can co-exist.” This belief is not only correct, but also not naïve. Only the erroneous context in which he states it makes it seem so.

Mr. Rose lays forth a perceived trend:

THERE IS a pattern at work. From Copernicus, whose heliocentric theory met with ecclesiastical wrath for questioning the medieval Ptolemaic orthodoxy of the encircling heavens, and Galileo, imprisoned and forced to repudiate his work for heretically calculating the laws of motion, to *intelligent design theorists being banned from the classroom and dismissed as something other than scientists*: Faith and reason have rarely coexisted without friction.

OK, OK, I inserted the italicized text; what was originally in its place was: “the current battles over vouchers for religious schools and the ban on genetic cloning.” The next paragraph explains further: “The cycle suggests that at each juncture, religion lashes out at science for demonstrating that the universe is not what it was thought to be.” I’d suggest to Mr. Rose that the actual cycle that he is following is that of leaders of established, entrenched ways of thinking lashing out at new ideas that might undermine their authority.

At present, secular humanism is the establishment in the public sphere, and its resistance to anything having to do with God has become the fanatic guarding of turf. For one example, I fail to see how seeking to give children access to private schools that their parents want them to attend is of a kind with imprisoning Galileo or has anything to do with investigating the universe. The inclusion of vouchers as part of Rose's "trend" would only make any sense if public schools were struggling to survive within a field dominated by religious schools.

Mr. Rose goes on to offer several similarly flawed comparisons to the "oppressive" suggestion that a school district should be allowed to present intelligent design in science lessons about the origin of life. He also suggests that "if the goal were truly to demonstrate the multiplicity of viewpoints," lessons ought to include "Hindu and Muslim traditions," whose "numbers rival those of any faith in the West." Unfortunately for his argument, Rose is wrong about both the statistics and the implications. Statistically, Christianity is by far the most populous religious "tradition" (and Islam accepts the Old Testament). But this is immaterial because intelligent design is not denominational. It presents no vision of what, exactly, God is and offers no suggestion about how humanity ought to act or to worship.

Rose declares that intelligent design "is not science. It is not even a theory, but, rather, a tautological argument supported by an unprovable assumption." Tautological arguments would be "we know the universe was designed because God designed the universe" or "we know that organisms that currently exist were naturally selected because they survived." Intelligent design doesn't even take as its goal proving God (at least any more than Evolution takes as its goal disproving God), but merely a deliberate actor or a cause. Investigators of intelligent design have observed patterns and complexity, sought to explain them through theories of design, and are seeking evidence. Evolution is still a theory, even if "scientists" dismiss the disclaimer of the "zealots" to this effect, and it is an imperfect one, which means that it ought to continue to face rigorous challenges.

The fact that opponents of teaching intelligent design are the establishment doesn't stop them from posing as the threatened vanguard. Here's Rose: "The religious right wants what it has always wanted: a marriage between church and state." In keeping with his entire essay, Rose doesn't offer a single quotation or any evidence that allows him to make the leap from a desire that a theory be mentioned (even mentionable) to a desire to interlock a specific religious doctrine with the government.

The closest thing to evidence that he provides on this count raises questions about whether he is really guarding the people of America from religious infringement on their rights. "Lest you believe that the religious right has a sincere interest in alternative views, remember that the same people are now attacking the University of North Carolina for requiring freshmen to learn about Islam." This summary mischaracterizes the argument against UNC. The "attackers" didn't raise objections to Islam being taught, but to the religion being cleansed of the attributes that have made it sufficiently topical to be the subject of a required general studies course. That Rose fails to make this differentiation suggests that he isn't, at bottom, concerned about indoctrination.

Of course, there's a difference between a university and a public school. However, Rose argues against intelligent design being taught as science in all of "academia, whether grade school or graduate school." He would relegate it to theology or philosophy. But intelligent design theorists aren't "theologians"; they aren't studying the nature of God nor the implications of God's existence.

Obviously, if God exists — as I believe He does and Mr. Rose believes He might — He would be a constituent part of reality. All sciences would ultimately lead to Him. He would be the "Omega Point" or the "First Cause." Alexander Rose and others who make similar arguments, leaving room for faith or not, approach reality with a profoundly flawed mindset. In Mr. Rose's words, "It's inevitable that religion will be nudged into tighter and tighter corners as science stampedes its way through the mysterious infrastructure of the universe."

This, itself, is a statement of faith: science will inevitably make religion obsolete, and the two can never overlap. From the perspective of the faithful, however, God becomes *broader* as our store of knowledge and our abilities expand because He does — *must* — touch on everything. Religion, along with the studies of philosophy and ethics to which Mr. Rose would tie it, is not merely an intellectual game. It must inform other areas of our lives.

So, while he exhorts “the pious” to “treat their texts as allegorical truths, not literal ones,” he takes science to represent “an affirmation of the human spirit.” If religious texts represent truths of any kind, they should have some influence on our application of science. This statement applies directly to another non sequitur in Rose’s proposed “trend.” Copernicus and Galileo were persecuted for their ideas — their investigation of the “infrastructure of the universe.” Cloning, in contrast, is not an investigation, but an application.

What Rose seems really to be advocating is license for science to go unhindered in any direction, whether investigative or applied. That’s why he includes exhortations for caution in the perennial stream of religious oppression of scientists. If there is design, there is likely purpose. If there is purpose, there is possible transgression. And for those who would transgress, denial is more easily accomplished through suppression than revisionism.

1. Rose, Alexander “Teaching intelligent design is akin to teaching Holocaust revisionism.” *The Providence Journal* 4/10/02

## Seasoning the Balance

10/14/02

The sun came out Monday.

It had been a dreary weekend, flooding my structured schedule and dampening my enthusiasm. I stumbled from one project to the next, my hours saturated with humdrum work, with little for the mind or the memory to grab and keep. I was caught between the seasons this weekend, standing at a gas station in a T-shirt with the wind blowing cold misty rain across my arms, my neck, and my face. I looked across the highway and thought of the sniper in Maryland. I thought of the husbands, wives, parents, and children standing at their windows come a weekday morning, watching loved ones' cars pull out of the driveway, the silhouette looking forward, down the road.

Life requires a precarious balance between preparing for a better future and drinking in each moment. We leave our families for the day in order to feed them in the evening; we give up a weekend here and there to earn a week off or some other amenity later. If we cannot take for granted that what we leave will always be there when we return, then we must just hope that it will be so. Perhaps it can be seen more correctly as a gamble; the odds are good, so we go to work.

Of course, the odds are even better if one works no farther from home than upstairs. I spent Sunday doing the tedious work of setting up a Web site for my students, replete with pages of instructions for the projects on which they are working. The process included doing the projects myself. On Monday, a

“holiday,” I did the work that I could not do on Friday, when I’d found myself without a babysitter (I spent the day with my daughter).

Monday evening, the crisp air made the entire summer seem almost as if it had been a dream. The storm brought cool air with it, and when the cover of clouds slipped out to sea, even more heat escaped from the land. But it was pleasant. Somehow, the colder seasons make me feel more a part of history. Perhaps the extra effort for one’s own comfort brings a feeling of humanity — and, thus, kindred humanity. The dogs moved more swiftly, too, with less of the tugging to stop and smell, allowing my mind to waft. And the smell of burning wood and the sound of lapping water made the year (the era) unimportant, ambiguous, moot.

The next day sent me back to work. The break in a schedule for a holiday always disorients — Tuesday’s pattern on what feels like a Monday. My first-grade class missed me this time around to attend a fire-prevention talk. More preparation. By lunch, it was fully Tuesday, but still busy; computers and the students, both, required convincing that they could do what I was asking them to do.

But I was prepared to teach. The Web site, with its instructions, gave the children somewhere to turn when I was on the other side of the room. The sample projects (“wicked cool”) gave direction and motivation. The day went quickly, and the students seemed to learn. Perhaps it was the best of both worlds: my present was enjoyable, and they did some small work toward preparing for the future.

## The Writer's Autumn Leaves

10/21/02

**A**utumn.

The year begins in autumn, although not entirely in line with the “school year.” The first month or two after the summer break, which has a certain feel even for those, including me, who have no actual break, involve slowing down from one season and beginning the work for the next. The changing color of the leaves is like a signal to move along, with the first few gusts of cold wind spurring us on — forward or inside or both.

Summer is plush. We lay back in the high grass of our lives, or at least coast in our movement, for a couple of months. Even we who keep working do so as if in a hammock. We swing lazily through our weeks and do not rush because we cannot. The people from whom we need things or to whom we must give things may be gone for a week or two. That's fine; we just slow down, picking up the pace again in the autumn.

Judging certain details of nature, the year seems a process from birth to death. But more broadly, taken year over year over year, it is not so stark a change. Rather, the year is a cycle: grow, glide, slow. The leaf dies in the autumn; the tree does not. The latest undertaking comes to completion; the career does not. It is a good time of year to wrap up projects and kick off new ones.

I describe the feel of the season thus because this essay is the last in my first year of writing the Just Thinking column. That means that it will be the last chapter of Volume I of the compilation book series that I plan to publish annually. Such an

unmistakable line as that between one book and another offers an opportunity to consider what passed while writing the previous pages and what can reasonably be expected to occur subsequent to writing the next “page one.”

Of course, it is easier to describe what has already happened. The difficulty, when looking back, is in seeing the broader trends that will lead into the future. I think that careers in the creative humanities exacerbate a fact of life in any pursuit: advances are made in fits and starts. The key is to cast seeds expansively so that they will be wherever the circumstances are, by chance, conducive to growth.

I guess that's a roundabout way of finding reason for optimism in the fact that, while much more happened this year than during the previous, triumphs came seemingly at random... disconnected and in no way that would differentiate between inchoate progress and disparate apogees. The first essay in the book of which these will be the final thoughts was the first piece of writing that earned me a paycheck. After “Who Are These People?” appeared in *The Providence Journal*, I received fantastic feedback from readers and other newspapers. Despite the promising atmosphere of last autumn, none of the other essays herein found their way to larger audiences than I've secured for my own Web site. Publication in the *ProJo* earned me a few subscribers to the Just Thinking email; during the intervening year, this list has gained and lost members.

In the spring and early summer, *The Redwood Review* found a broader audience than can be promised by many more-established periodicals. But those periodicals, representing acceptance rather than self-promotion, might have felt more like progress. It always feels different when somebody else types one's name — when “by Justin Katz” is not the same as “by me.”

In the late summer and early autumn, *Dust in the Light*, my Web log, has periodically managed an even broader audience and has done so through attention paid by more-established writers. But the reader-transferring links from such incumbents come and go, with no real feel of progress. Simply by some combination of

timing, content, and interest, a person with many more readers than I can claim feels something to be worth a few seconds of typing. One week, this leads thousands of people to my work; the next week, I'm back to dozens.

Perhaps all of these minor, discrete advances do more than create a body of work from which to leap when opportunity swings by. They may also lay seeds of notice and name recognition that will sprout unpredictably in the months and years ahead. But still: "unpredictably" is the key word. *The New Yorker* could come a-knockin'... unpredictably. A particular work could unpredictably propel my career to a state accurately called "success," previous achievements or not.

And that is the point. A writer is not so much akin to a farmer, who plants seeds with the reasonable expectation that they will yield crops and with methods of ensuring that they do. A writer is more like a tree that scatters its leaves and seeds and waits.

Just waits for the year that brings a seedling, not forgetting to thank those who gather the leaves and climb among the branches for the company.

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Justin Katz's parents set the tone for his life when they chose his first name for the reason that "Christian" seemed to clash with their Jewish last name. He is a politically conservative artist, a convert to Catholicism from "Orthodox Intellectualism," and a pragmatist who is often accused of idealism. Just Thinking is Justin's weekly column, expressing his thoughts on life, society, religion, the arts, government, and the media, with an occasional offering of fiction or poetry.

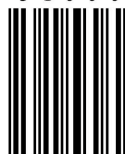


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