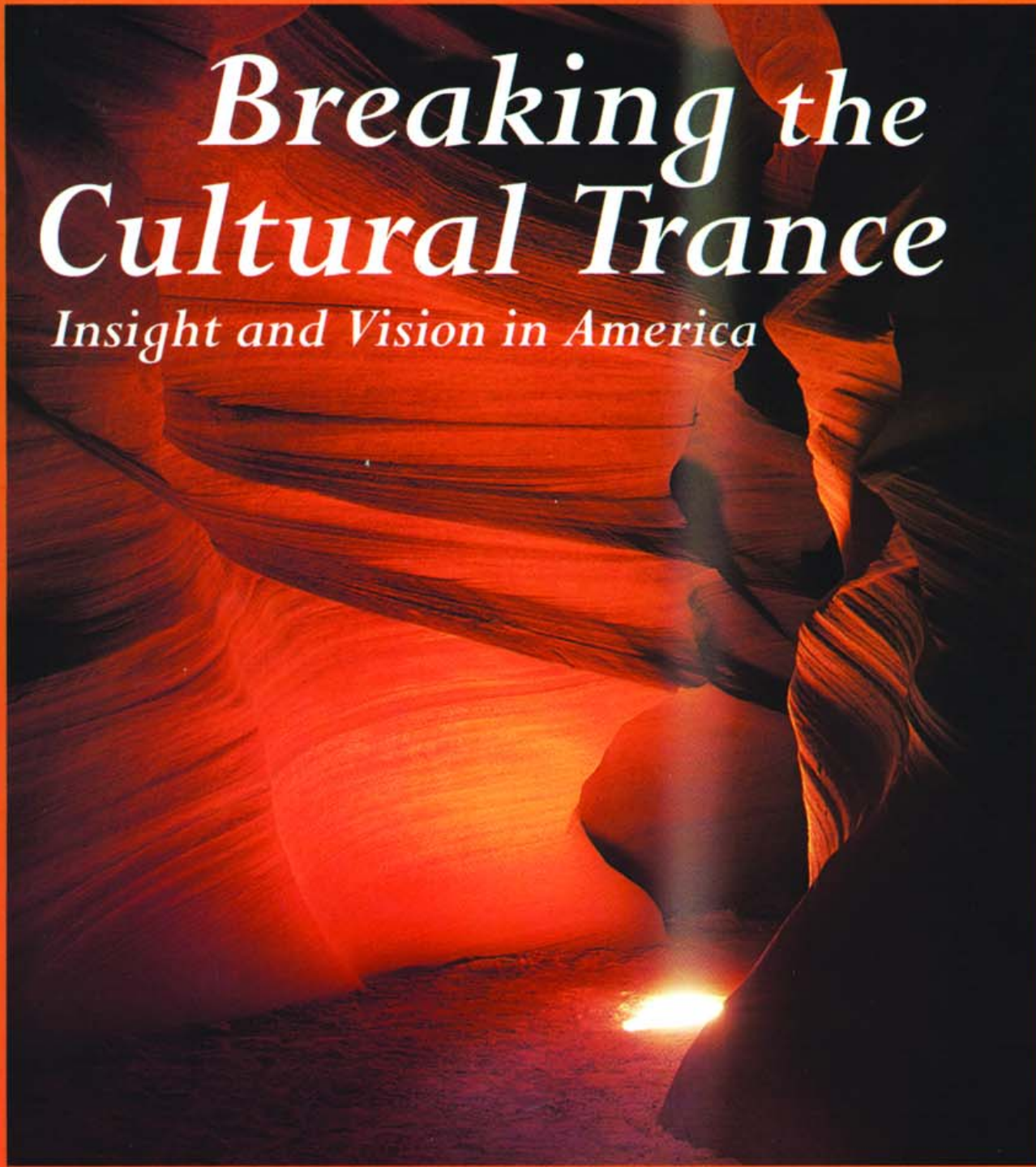


Robert Inchausti



# *Breaking the Cultural Trance*

*Insight and Vision in America*



*Essays on Deepening the American Dream*

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## BREAKING THE CULTURAL TRANCE

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INSIGHT AND VISION IN AMERICA

*Robert Inchausti*

*We are living in the greatest revolution in history—a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.*

—Thomas Merton,  
*Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

### A Diverging Inheritance

AS AN AMERICAN, I sometimes feel like the heir of an eccentric genius who ignored his family in order to make millions in international finance. What exactly does such an enormous material inheritance mean to me if there is no happiness in the home? Are all these possessions just a very elaborate surrogate for love? Or is there something else going on here? A hidden legacy, a deeper truth that needs to be unearthed, defended, and explained? Today as terrorist threats blow against our lives like an unflagging wind and political controversies infiltrate even the most intimate aspects of our lives, we are being forced to leave our adolescent impatience with complexity behind and, like the prodigal son, come home to a heritage that we never honestly appreciated because it was never truly understood.

The American dream, as our Puritan forefathers imagined it, was not a dream of abundance through which every desire could be fulfilled but a

life lived in accord with conscience, a life ruled by the heart, not dictated to by material or political circumstances.<sup>1</sup> “Sanctifying grace,” as they understood it, was to grow and deepen as their understanding of God grew and deepened. Conscience, in other words, was not an unflagging absolute but a creature of dialogue nurtured by prayer, scriptural study, and personal sacrifice. It was not Freud’s internalized parental prejudices or an unchanging interior compass but rather a work in progress: the most profound accomplishment of a free people.

And so whatever one might say about the historical legacy of the Puritans—the witch hunts, the Indian wars, and the unabashed chauvinism—they did ingrain in the American character a deep desire for integrity and authenticity. Unlike their modern, positive-thinking descendants, the Puritans never thought of this country as a paradise on earth but more as a purgatory where the faithful might journey together toward an ever more accurate understanding of God’s will.

The Founding Fathers enshrined this religious conception of life in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution by foregrounding the principle that we can grow as a people and as individuals only to the degree that we “check and balance” our own inherently self-destructive impulses. This unique synthesis of spiritual aspiration with skeptical, secular authority was not the product of any abstract European political theory per se but rather the outgrowth of a completely different vision of the relationship between civil authority and the spiritual life.<sup>2</sup> The Founding Fathers simply assumed that democratic institutions—like every other human construct—existed within a more transcendent cosmic order. And how one related to that transcendent order could not be directed by any nationalist agenda or curtailed by institutional forces. It was one of those fortuitous accidents of history that by refusing to dictate the terms of religious expression, the United States government actually increased the value of a morally engaged, spiritual life, transforming a life lived in accord with conscience into the much more liberating and demanding challenge of practicing what one preached.

This is why the word *deism* is not sufficient to describe the worldview of our Founding Fathers. It makes it sound as though their innovative synthesis of soul and *civitas* was the expression of some very specific antique creed, whereas the truth of the matter is that the term was simply “made up” to describe the unique dialogue they initiated between faith and rationality. The idea that a government’s primary responsibilities were to protect the rights of individuals to follow their conscience and to protect civil society from the tyranny of both majorities and minorities had the unex-

pected consequence of directing religious idealism toward practical human achievements and the quest for a universal ethic.

The unique power of this heady “search for a synthesis” between the theoretical and the concrete was brought home to me a few years ago by a Vietnamese student who just happened to take my American literature course.

After the quarter was over, Thi came by my office to thank me for the class. I told her that no thanks were necessary, that teaching was my job, and I got paid for it.

“No,” she insisted, “you don’t understand. Ever since I came over here from Vietnam, my parents have been telling me how great America is. But I never could see it. All I could see were shopping malls, bad television shows, and pickup trucks. But after taking your class, now I know what makes America so great.”

“Tell me,” I asked. “What makes it great?”

She looked me right in the eye and said with reverence, “Ralph Waldo Emerson.”

It was a moving moment for me. I teach Emerson all the time, so it’s easy to forget how life-changing his vision can be, how heady his bold assertions of human potential, how comforting his acknowledgment of solitude as the natural ally of every true individual. And it’s easy to forget that we don’t always need new ideas to deepen our lives; the old ones freshly conceived can do the same thing.

Not wanting to be narrow-minded, I asked her if she had read any Vietnamese literature. She said that she had but that she liked American literature better. Vietnamese literature, she told me, was mostly about wars with the Chinese, but American literature, she said, was one long lesson on how to free your own mind.

Then she read me her credo. It was a passage from the introduction to Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* that she had copied out onto the back of her notebook:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth, the sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, reexamine all you have

been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body. . . .

As she read this, I almost cried. She had found in Whitman a succinct summary of the finest American virtues: spiritual largesse and inclusion, the rejection of pretense and status, an admiration for the outcast and the outsider, the love of the earth and the animals—but perhaps most important of all, the need to see the transcendent in the immanent and the Word in the Flesh.

I guess I really shouldn't have been surprised that at the threshold of Thi's discovery of America stood the most revolutionary precursor of them all, "the American Jesus,"<sup>3</sup> the great, gray, gay poet of democracy, Walt Whitman. He was exactly what she was looking for—the confirmation of all her secret wishes, the proof that there was a spiritual tradition in this country after all! America really did possess a self-conscious understanding of its own radical egalitarianism and the brave souls who lived in the light of that revelation.

Thi went on to graduate school at Emerson College in Boston. She went there largely because of its name. I tried to tell her that she didn't need to go to Emerson College to be an Emersonian, but she wanted her external circumstances to reflect her inner reality.

She has since graduated and works for a computer firm in southern California. She sent me an e-mail just a few months ago about her trip to Ground Zero in New York City and about her ongoing attempts to see through the world's pretensions and "dismiss whatever insults her own soul."

Thi's story made it clear to me that one way to deepen the American dream is to take the same approach as the Transcendentalists: contest its one-dimensional materialism, embrace its vision of individual responsibility, and simply dismiss the managed environments and pseudoevents that try to pass themselves off as reality.

Admittedly, Thi was a first-generation American, and so Emerson may have struck deeper chords in her than in her more jaded native-born peers. The idea that each of us possesses untapped potential, that faith is an aid to making that potential actual, and that self-actualization and membership in a revelatory community are the ultimate ends of civilization may not be as inspiring to those who already think of themselves as the envy

of the world and have never felt the bitter sting of poverty or institutionalized prejudice. Not that native-born Americans are complacent exactly; if anything, they seem far less secure in their simulated worlds than the immigrant in the new world. Overwhelmed by the multifaceted, multi-layered incomprehensibility of their lives, they willingly embrace various forms of stupidity to protect themselves from the horrors of uncertainty and change and the boredom of a jaded existence. It is not that they lack intelligence; it is that they purposely narrow their consciousness to small, manageable matters in order to pare down the infinity of options that perpetually dwarfs any single choice they might make. Camp, kitsch, and satire seem to be needed as a hedge against all the false promises and empty urgings they must endure.<sup>4</sup>

Native-born Americans are not born culture critics; they are born success seekers, bent on going their parents and their peers one better—not necessarily by achieving any greater understanding of themselves or the world but by getting more of what everyone else seems to want and making good on other people's missed opportunities. They are not particularly moral beings. They live on the surfaces of things—ambitious and pragmatic to a fault, alive to the images before them and the external trappings of pleasure and success but dull to the ineffable, the indirect, the iconographic, and the implied.

Last year in my modern poetry class, we were studying a poem by Pablo Neruda, a beautiful, tragic lament from *Canto General* about the human costs of living under a dictatorship. One of my students—a home-grown American native of Salinas, California, and a business major—objected that Neruda was biting the hand that fed him: “After all, the dictator was only helping to integrate Chile further into the global economy.” The ignorance of this remark didn't really astonish me, but for the first time I saw it for what it was—the product of a bad education magnified by the blind impatience of youth, the result of a hurried need to know coupled to the false assumptions that answers are more important than questions and that knowledge must always have a material, if not immediate, payoff.

My American-born student couldn't see the power of Neruda's view into the tragic ironies of life because he had heard (no doubt from one of my lectures) that Neruda was a “Marxist,” and so—given the ideological bent of our current academic culture—he thought he knew all he needed to know about who Neruda was and what he stood for. Consequently, he could find in the poem only what his labels allowed him to perceive. Neruda's brave protest against the excesses of totalitarianism, his cry from

the heart for spiritual liberty and political freedom, became for this impatient, poorly educated, American-born opportunist merely just one more egghead's attack on free market capitalism.

Such are the perceptual lacunae we breed in our young by our unmitigated focus on knowing things. They suspect and dismiss anything that doesn't solve a problem or have the potential to serve as the answer to an exam question. Any challenge to their ideas and linguistic formulations poses a direct threat—not only to their grade point average but to their self-image and hence to their very existence. So they learn very quickly how to avert their gaze from troubling anomalies, unsolvable questions, and potentially embarrassing complexities and in some cases even how to bully others into accepting their own simplistic formulations.

This pernicious identification of their identity with their opinions, talents, and personal accomplishments is one of the most damaging misconceptions in our culture. It overpersonalizes debate, undermines creative speculation, rigidifies community life, and bleeds spiritual energy out of every one of our cultural enterprises, misshaping our educational and religious institutions and sealing the best minds of this generation within a bubble of narrow expectations.

Native-born American youth often have no clue of the cultural trance they live in, so whenever anyone—a teacher or a writer—can make the historically conditioned artificiality of their lives visible to them, these teachers deepen the American dream. This is, of course, not an easy thing to do, for the more widespread the trance, the more true believers must prove its superiority, and so our national success myth carries with it a need for self-confirmation.

One of the reasons my business student couldn't appreciate the poetry of Pablo Neruda, he later told me, was because Neruda wasn't "rich." Why should he listen to a poet when the world is run by financiers? Indeed, why should anyone even attempt to see through the world's illusions unless he or she believed in something as old-fashioned as reality?

As a poet well versed in the surrealist dynamics of modern-day Chilean politics, Neruda understood how difficult it is to remain attuned to the soul's vocation in an ideological age. When we are beset by propaganda and nationalist mythologies, our capacity for human empathy flags; our speech loses its lyricism, freedom, music, and wit; and we devolve into imaginary actors in a staged historical drama so poorly composed that even we have difficulty believing in the parts that we play—not to mention difficulty believing in reality.<sup>5</sup>

"Deepening the American dream," for such success-driven, ideologically primed, homegrown "absurdist," is quite a different thing than it



is for American immigrants. The native-born are far less interested in making sense of their situation than they are in acquiring pleasure, status, power, and control. Unlike immigrants, they do not judge their achievements against the moral and intellectual progress of humankind but rather against the accomplishments of their peers and the lives and leisure of millionaires and celebrities. This has the compounding effect of driving them deeper into the media culture and making them more ambitious for public notoriety of any sort, which only makes them even more unhappy, guilty, and self-righteous, all at the same time. It is as if the more empty the experiences, the more of them are needed!

One needn't pursue a psychoanalytical discourse here on the decline of the American character. Academics go too far in their hand-wringing analyses of postmodernism and the decline of values. Besides, Americans are not really occupied from within by corporate media images so much as they are isolated from their own inherent idealism and heroic past in postures of ironic self-defense—living a life of feigned indifference, longing for sincerity but incapable of imagining what it would be like to experience it.

At the close of the nineteenth century, Leo Tolstoy lamented the fact that the Russian middle class and aristocracy were so divorced from the material realities of everyday life that they were no longer capable of experiencing authentic grief, authentic love, or authentic courage. They spent their lives in relative luxury that only heightened their appetites, inflated their ambitions, distorted their affections, and turned the most spirited among them into reckless adventurers or duplicitous success seekers totally out of touch with themselves or the realities of their time.<sup>6</sup>

The same could be said of us and our progeny. Increasingly incapable of discerning love from lust, anger from indignation, fear from grief, or hope from ambition, we seek some sort of map to orient our interior lives. But to the extent that the programs, processes, therapies, and philosophies that are supposed to supply these maps reinforce the centrality of individual accomplishment, we find ourselves plunging ever more deeply into the very dilemmas we hope to cure.

Grief, loss, suffering, and contrition are, of course, the traditional medicines for hubris and self-absorption. But simply waiting for life's honesty to fall on us naturally isn't a particularly forward-thinking strategy for those of us seeking to deepen the American dream by calling it back to its radical democratic roots. Besides, suffering in itself was never worth much unless it was tied to some great ideal, and homegrown Americans already pay an enormous psychological price for their narrow focus on personal happiness and material achievement. Depression and anxiety are at near

epidemic levels.<sup>7</sup> And there is a growing clinical consensus that both of these maladies arise from a misguided attempt to control life.

This desire for mastery fosters a fascination with all manner of positive-thinking strategies, miracle cures, tactics, techniques, dirty tricks, and sympathetic magic. Americans are apt to try anything once if it promises them some material benefit—everything from transcendental meditation and the Thigh Master, to the prayer of Jabez, right on up to and including pulling the sheets up over their heads or taking a gun to school. All of these are attempts to halt change, either by forcing the moment to its crisis or refuting its dynamics entirely by sheer force of will.

When such superficial and desperate measures reach a critical mass, cultural narcissism passes into outright paranoia, and then personal security, preoccupations with one's health, addictive routines, material accumulation, sexual experimentation, and military might become the preoccupations of the land and intellectual timidity and vice insinuate themselves throughout the body politic. This reactionary "cocooning" is then further aggravated by apocalyptic radio hosts, misanthropic rock stars, fear-mongering politicians, and all manner of false prophets who exploit our phobias and insecurities. This in turn inflates the national ego and drives the quest for a life lived in accord with conscience even further to the margins of our society.<sup>8</sup> As a people, we have ingratiated ourselves far too willingly into the mechanical extensions of our need for material security—almost to the point of a pathological fascination with means over ends, becoming the tools of our tools.

Immigrants like Thi are less vulnerable to such distortions because for them Emerson's America is as real as the America they experience in the shopping malls or see on television. In fact, Emerson's America is more real because it answers the immigrants' question as to what it means to live in America without losing one's soul—a question homegrown Americans seldom ask because they assume that their souls are safe and they are so busy trying to succeed that they have no time to worry about anything but their families and their bank accounts. As a result, they often forgo their responsibilities as citizens, whereas immigrants like Thi embrace their civic responsibilities as a unique opportunity to make sure that *their* idealism, *their* heroism, indeed *their very souls*, will not go unregistered in the life of the republic. For Thi, it would be a failure of character not to become the most accomplished person she could be—not just in terms of financial success but in terms of self-knowledge and ethical wholeness as well.

If we wish to inspire homegrown American youth to seek their place within the world historical gestalt, question the culture they live in, or

even just seek out an understanding of what it means to live an “examined life,” we will need a very different strategy than the transcendentalists’ frontal assault on “dead traditions” and worldly authorities. We must first liberate the young from the fears that breed their moral posturing and then free them again from the shame that accompanies their realization of just how little they know. Until this happens, they will continue to linger in the shadows of their own misperceived “success,” feeling both superior and ignorant at the very same time.

### A Community of Revelation

The vocation of the teacher, like the artist and the statesman, is to awaken us from our cultural trance, our unthinking acquiescence to conventional life, and initiate us into a community of seekers who confirm and deepen our sense of being called. One of the most profound articulations of how this can be done is in William Gibson’s Pulitzer Prize–winning play *The Miracle Worker*—which is to my mind the finest play ever written on the vocation of the teacher and the meaning of revelation. The climactic water pump scene alone tells us almost everything we need to know about what it means to move from mere existence to being *alive*.

Annie Sullivan is sitting at the family dinner table, celebrating Helen Keller’s return to the family home after living in isolation with Annie for two weeks of intense language training. Helen’s father, a traditional Victorian patriarch, is ecstatic because Annie has succeeded in teaching the girl table manners. But Annie is frustrated because the child still hasn’t grasped the symbolic connection between signs and things, so although she can sign some words, she still can’t use her imagination. She is, in truth, little more than a trained monkey who has not yet made the miraculous leap into her own creative humanity.

In order to see if the rigorous discipline established over the past two weeks still applies in her parents’ home, Helen begins to “forget” her manners and drops her napkin. Her mother lets the indiscretion go uncorrected, but Annie demands that Helen pick it up. In defiance, Helen sweeps her arm across the table, smashing the china and sending her mother’s roast flying across the room. She even takes a pitcher of water and splashes it in Annie’s face. Realizing that all her previous work is at stake here, Annie picks Helen up, carries her outside, and makes her refill the pitcher at the water pump. As she does so, Annie continues, for what seems like the millionth time, to sign words into Helen’s hand. “Water,” she says, and thrusting Helen’s hands to the pump handle, signs, “W-A-T-E-R.”

Annie is not doing this because she thinks Helen will learn this time but simply because she doesn't know what else to do. Helen resists—crying, kicking, pushing, and pulling. Then, as instantly as this outburst had begun, her tantrum stops. She becomes quiet, absorbed, and perfectly still. Rapt with attention, Helen finally makes the connection between words and things, signs and experience, and in that moment enters into the human community, the community of revelation. In that glorious scene, Helen says, “Wa, wa,” and her world is transformed.

But what happens next is every bit as moving. Helen whirls around the yard trying to touch *everything*, thirsty for the signs that represent her world.

“What's this?” Helen indicates, touching a post. “And this? And this? And this?” Annie calls to her parents: “Mr. and Mrs. Keller! Come! Come! Helen knows. She *knows!*”

What does she know? She knows that she is part of a race of beings who experience a common reality, beings who know and name and share their knowing, and in knowing that they know, they accept one another as intimate coparticipants in what theologians sometimes refer to as the Being of Being. Helen learned from Annie that she was part of the human condition, heir to a bottomless and fathomless subjectivity infinite unto itself, existing within and as part of a mysterious universe of unfathomable value.

Helen's parents emerge from the dining room, and she runs to embrace them—touching their faces and signing their names, knowing them for the very first time, loving them as human beings who share life with her. But then she stops, walks over to Annie Sullivan, and touches her face. “Who are you?” she asks. Annie signs out the word “T-E-A-C-H-E-R.” And they embrace. It is what one might call a prophetic moment, for it is clear that from now on, Annie and Helen share something far deeper than signs or sentiment. Annie is not a parent, limited by pity or frustrated by libidinal bonds. Nor is she an agent of culture transferring the conventions of American Sign Language. She is something quite different, something much more profound. She is a teacher, an ally to the heroic possibilities within, a midwife to revelation, what William Gibson calls “a miracle worker.”

This inspiring vision of the teacher as prophet and education as revelation parallels many of my own experiences in education. Had I not met a certain dedicated and uncompromising professor my sophomore year at the state university, I might very well have lost my soul. Had he not placed my hand on the works of William Blake and made the signs of life and had he not persisted after I shrugged him off, placing my hands on

the novels of Dostoyevsky and then again on the essays of Emerson, I would never have heard the call to a life lived in accord with conscience. But thanks to my teacher, I, like Helen, was now obligated to live a deeper life and to pass on this possibility to others.

Again, the question was how? How was I to connect the vocation of revelation to the largely indifferent, materialistic world in which I found myself immersed? It was as if in waking up to the fact that my life had yet to be fully discovered or honestly named, I had not been liberated at all but rather infected with an incurable disease that forever severed me from my world.

This lack of continuity between my inner life and outer circumstances baffled me for many years. I knew I was called to a life lived in accord with conscience, to a life lived from the inside out, but such a life didn't always seem welcome in the schools I attended or in the television shows I watched or in the jobs I held or even in the career ambitions I was encouraged to adopt. I found it reflected only in the artistic and religious extremes—in the literary masters and mystics, in plebeian revolutionaries and philosophical outcasts.

This bothered me for a long time, for what good was an exalted sense of human possibility if it only alienated you from your society, a society that operated on much less sublime premises? What good were precise articulations of contemporary dilemmas if one's leaders and institutions were simply too coarse or too distant to register them? And what did revelation matter if nature itself absorbed all of our protests into an abyss of sex, death, and indifference?

It wasn't until I met my mentor, Brother Ed, that I understood that these questions were the expression and essence of a great vocation: the sublime calling of a classroom teacher.<sup>9</sup> He showed me that one of the ways I could reconcile myself to these tensions was to dedicate my life to the young by becoming a teacher, a miracle worker, an agent of revelation.

Revelations of the kind that changed Helen Keller's life, he explained to me, were becoming increasingly rare in our schools. They were being replaced by knowledge, professionalism, and other forms of information science, driving the religious aspirations of the young underground and rendering them oblivious to the likes of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. Such figures had been rendered by their teachers into mere cartoons, illustrative examples of outmoded trends and superseded fashions

Ed told me that in their heart of hearts, American youth wanted someone to rescue them from the false prophets and sophists who have rendered all intuitive knowledge suspect—distorting its power and fatally tainting its significance. Revelation, he told me, is not just some clever

invention or insight, like the “Water Wiggle” or “cultural relativism,” but a qualitative shift in awareness that links the individual to a tradition, group, or language to which he or she had previously not had access. It is not an increase in information so much as it is an initiation into a community, a quantum leap in point of view that takes us inside a universe of discourse from which we had previously been excluded either by simple ignorance or by misdirected attention.

To the extent that our schools place test scores above these epiphanies, they not only mold young minds in the image of their own narrow professional goals (orderly classrooms, model curricula, and higher than average test scores) but also incapacitate them philosophically and further what Herbert Marcuse once described as “the moronization of the United States.”<sup>10</sup> For Marcuse, the focus on instrumental reasoning (to the exclusion of theoretical abstraction) had rendered American culture devoid of general ideas and incapable of abstract thought.

In every moment in every classroom, a choice must be made between control and discovery, between the familiar and the new, between safety and danger, between repetition and revelation. Good teachers, like good martial artists, understand that to meet the needs of the moment, you must live dangerously and move into that zone where the joy of illumination triumphs over the comforting but deadly illusions of the known. Such existential bravery, however, is too often discouraged by technocrats and mid-level professionals who have a material stake in the repeatable process over the creative act and the once-in-a-lifetime breakthrough.

These hardworking, middle-brow managers see the future in continuity with the past and so have nothing to say except to repeat the tired litanies of the known and chart our way into a collective future of more of the same. And most of them are damn good at it. They know what they want and have confidence in themselves and their moral authority. But as Emerson pointed out, such “retained attorneys” are not American scholars and so do not represent the genuine American dream. “There every truth is not quite true. There two is not the real two, there four not the real four: so that every word they say chagrins us, and we do not know where to begin to set them right.”<sup>11</sup>

Needless to say, these Philistines don’t provide a very inspiring vision of the future to people just waking up to the existential reality of their lives, and yet most of the young are savvy enough (and sufficiently demoralized) to put their disappointments aside in order to navigate their way through the colleges and schools run by such functionaries. They spot the “scripts” being run very quickly and make their way through the posturing with very little complaint, mistakenly assuming that by not making

waves and by speaking to form, they can achieve all that they want. This makes classroom teaching a very tricky business, because if you are serious about it like Annie Sullivan, you can't just work your way through the textbook or produce students who score high on the SATs. You must free them from their slavish conformity to other people's expectations so that they can begin to see with their own eyes, speak from their own hearts, and understand with their own minds. What was Nietzsche's wonderful advice to the young? "Be yourself! All that you think, feel, and desire is not really you."<sup>12</sup> This isn't very surprising advice for an immigrant for whom everything in the world has been transformed, but when you are teaching homegrown Americans who think of themselves as living at the apex of history and as the envy of the world, who have been subjected to flattery and hype and patronizing their entire lives, who have been tested and measured endlessly for their capacity to follow instructions and robbed of any access to their own radical intellectual traditions, then more circuitous methods are called for.

Brother Ed taught me a number them.

First, always insist on existential distinctions that mark the difference between real experience and feigned understanding. Point out that there is a world of difference between talking and speaking, thinking and reasoning, "the performance" and "the doing." Talking, according to Ed, is emotional sharing, a passing back and forth of ideas; speaking is putting one's own unique point of view into words and up for grabs. Thinking is a little like worrying, an essentially associative process, an inward churning of images and ideas into various patterns; reasoning is the thoughtful attempt to sort through things logically. It takes time; it follows a procedure; it seeks internal coherence. And "performance," as the word suggests, is a simulation of achievement by appropriating the form of a thing. It is act, not an action; while "the doing" is an actual creative accomplishment that manifests itself in a new reality in real time.

Second, try to ask questions that have no answers as of yet, so that students will be thrown back on their own developing intellectual resources and brought into the self-created community of true thinkers and spiritual explorers.<sup>13</sup> Third, try to anticipate all the predictable "opinions" before they are even uttered, write them down, and pass them out before any meeting or discussion so that commonplaces can be ruled out right from the start. Doing so cuts off all lines of escape into clichés, truisms, and bromides, thereby making it impossible to evade real thinking.

Fourth, throw away the teacherly agenda altogether and relax into the actual confusion of your students' minds, giving up any and all images of a "successful" lesson, and letting moments of revelation emerge of their

own accord. In truth, if teachers and parents would stop force-feeding their children predigested insights and simulated epiphanies, they would have to own up to the truth of their own experience.

Finally, prepare to be criticized and misunderstood by your peers and evaluators. If you do, in fact, throw away the teacherly agenda and attend to the actual confusion of your students' minds, you will be charged with all manner of incompetence by those who want to replace your immeasurable aspirations with their behavioral objectives. Try not to let this bother you; it comes with the territory.

When I taught with Brother Ed, a new principal eliminated—*overnight*—an innovative humanities curriculum Ed had spent more than twenty years painstakingly putting into place. I was so outraged when I got the news that I ran to tell him while he was taking his morning walk around the athletic field. Ed was in his late sixties at the time, and I was surprised that he wasn't upset by the news at all. "They like to change things," he told me. "That's how they justify their pay and prove their professionalism. They move from a quarter system to a semester system to a trimester system and back again about every five years, upsetting everyone's lives in the process. They deemphasize grammar in favor of linguistics, then deemphasize linguistics in favor of literary theory, then return to grammar again in an endless attempt to turn education into something less miraculous than it really is. They don't know what we do. They aren't in the revelation business!" And with that he disappeared into one of those dense fog banks that dotted the track on that cold January morning. Then out of nowhere I could hear him shout back to me, "They can't even see us!"

Such strategies and admonitions are useful to anyone attempting to clear away the half-truths and self-serving programmatic formulations that drive revelation underground. The real enemies of the American dream were never the critics, skeptics, or even the nihilists in our midst but rather the Philistines, opportunists, boosters, and professional elites who foist a surrogate dream in its place, a dream of order, teamwork, hierarchies, and measurable outcomes to replace the dangerous vistas of Whitman's cosmic democracy. Like Helen Keller's parents, they never really cared if their children grew souls, just so long as they ate well.

But teachers, like poets and immigrants, and dissenters, must refuse to be taken in by such agents of the status quo and hold fast to Emerson's dictum that there can be no scholarship without the heroic mind. In other words, there can be no intellectual life without dangerous conversations, outlandish questions, awkward silences, unprofessional outbursts, and the unabashed stupidity that cries out not just for correction but for a loving recognition of its truthfulness.



## Renewing the Experiment

One of the sad legacies of the Cold War and its aftermath is that the vision of America as the search for a consensus spiritual reality—a true, universal ethic—has been superseded by an oligarchy of professional sophists, influence peddlers, and political illusionists who value power over process and product over meaning. The Allied victory in World War II may have saved the world from entering a new dark age, but our failure to recognize the waning democratic values that preceded the war and that threatened to collapse in its wake has created the very real possibility that our military successes and national sacrifices are rapidly becoming hollow.

We might very well triumph over our adversaries without carrying into the future any vestige of the religious asceticism, social egalitarianism, or radical democratic individualism that animated our worldview in the first place. Should that happen, the dream of a life lived in accord with conscience would disappear into a new mythos of worldly success, and then the United States really would become an imperial empire, the sober guardians of a disillusioned world order run on a calculus of power, bereft of Helen Keller-like revelations, Emersonian idealism, Thoreauvian epiphanies, or Whitmanesque largesse.<sup>14</sup>

World War II and its aftermath have forced Americans to regard their country more as an economic and military power than as a moral and metaphysical experiment, and this has led to a crisis of personal meaning in the lives of our young that is not sufficiently recognized. To meet the dangerous new power alignments and military threats of the twentieth century, America became corporate, consolidated, internationally connected, militarily ready, and run by professional managers, social scientists, and experts. As a result, the question of preserving its unique democratic character took a backseat to partisan bickering over whose interests the new superstate was going to serve.

Despite Dwight D. Eisenhower's prescient warning to beware of the military-industrial complex and Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to a more universal conception of the Bill of Rights, most Americans continue simply to put their shoulders to the wheel of progress and accept their burdens without asking too many questions. The contrarian (or independent) point of view so eloquently defended by the likes of Henry David Thoreau and Oliver Wendell Holmes, just to mention two, has become so marginalized that virtually all our serious literature focuses on our failed resistance to the pressures of the new psychological totalitarianism. Over the last fifty years, we have made far too great a compromise with

the ways of the world. Seldom, if ever, is Annie Sullivan's vision defended, asserted, or even explained.

The emerging global economy does not solve these problems; in fact, it heightens them by presenting us with a vast smorgasbord of conflicting worldviews severed from their origins and thrown together by asymmetrical economic needs. The fundamental questions of existence are so radically reframed that we have even more trouble sorting out fact from fiction, ideology from analysis, wisdom from prejudice, and publicity from product. The hyperpsychological sophistication of advertisers and state propagandists have not only distorted the operation of our free markets but also subverted the epistemological and ontological dimensions of our democratic process.<sup>15</sup> Politics no longer functions as collective decision making but has become an esoteric art of mass manipulation and control—Machiavellian to a fault, tactical in the extreme, and ultimately morally corrupting.

If the history of the twentieth century has taught us nothing else, it has made clear that human culture is not a stay against moral erosion, a revolution in manners, or a Utopian alternative to the violence of history.<sup>16</sup> Human culture is, as T. S. Eliot suggested, what we make of the mess we have made of things.<sup>17</sup> At its best, it can provide a sustained resistance to the ever-changing face of depersonalization and false authority, challenging the complacencies of the middle class, the entitlements of the rich, and the internalized powerlessness of the poor.

The problem isn't that our leaders don't know these things; it's just that they are not original enough in the conclusions they draw from them or brave enough in their attempts to dispel the confusions. They always seem to opt out of paradox for tactical responses and action-oriented solutions. To collapse the ironies of history within the framework of any programmatic analysis, however nuanced or complex, only serves to place knowledge before revelation again and procedural thinking over creative response.

The good news is that most Americans have never bought into the materialist premises that dominate our commercial culture and guide our imperialistic foreign policy. Something in them resists: a residue of hope in transcendent possibilities, an unused idealism that they take home with them after work and hide in the silent, contemplative reaches of their hearts. The fundamentalist Protestant revival of the 1980s, as well as the current popularity of Buddhism, *The Course in Miracles*, and other "spiritual things," are all expressions of this desire to somehow escape from our self-created political house of mirrors into something universal, transcendent, and real.

Perhaps this is why American-born youth are so fascinated with travel and extreme sports. They suspect that maybe China, Mexico, Chile, or

Japan has something more solid to offer them. If not, then a death-defying slide down the side of a mountain will certainly free one's mind, if only momentarily, from the ever-present unreality of commercial hype.<sup>18</sup>

The problem, of course, is that if this desire is going to lead to anything more significant than another conservative retrenchment, we will need a postmythological perspective on human development that goes beyond both consumerism and nationalism to a true solidarity with the poor and with those not at home in our interpreted, quantified, and commercialized world. I am thinking here of some form of cultural expression that will resonate with those perennial carriers of the American dream: the dissidents, the artists, the outcasts, the immigrants, the refugees, the reformers, and the working poor. These "pariahs" remain America's true avant-garde, for their lives embody an instinctive flinch both away from the part of us that is sustained and identified with the powers that be and toward the part of us experienced in times of loss and psychological disintegration when we must gather up all our courage, resolve, and grit in order to reconstitute our lives at a deeper and more inclusive level of reality—like George Washington did at Valley Forge, Abraham Lincoln at Gettysburg, and Martin Luther King Jr. in Birmingham. The inner life of the America soul, its true self, remains hidden in the silences of our unexpressed idealists, our young, our misunderstood outsiders, our struggling immigrants, our martyred firefighters, and our stoic poor. They alone seem to know that we are not who we think we are, that our country remains incomplete without their contribution, and that they themselves, in coming to be who they were meant to become, will fulfill the ideals of our greatest statesmen and most profound poets far better than our privilege class.

Such a refocusing on our coming into being—rather than on our riches and privileges—holds far-reaching implications for how we learn and who we think we are. It shifts interest away from the tactics of successful living toward an existential analysis of individual struggle and honest dialogue over our ultimate concerns. It makes Pablo Neruda more important than Tony Robbins and transforms a news story about how a war in Iraq will affect the supply of oil in Tennessee into the story of how such a shift in resources will affect our lives as democratic individualists committed to making our own destiny not on the backs of others but in the light of our highest ethical and religious responsibilities. Conventional political journalists—especially the more successful ones—will have a hard time making the transition from power assessments of leaders like Henry Kissinger to the soul-searching democratic idiom of the likes of Tom Paine, but it is a transition that will have to be made if we want to find a way back to the visionary promise of America.

My grandfather was a Basque sea captain, an immigrant who fell from his ship in San Francisco harbor, hit his head on an anchor, acquired a progressive skin disease, and ultimately committed suicide in his cabin. The day after his death, all of his friends received in the mail a drawing of two hands clasped. Needless to say, he has become something of a family myth, and I have often wondered what he was thinking about when he sent off those icons of human brotherhood. Was his first-generation American soul too empty or too full? Were his letters apologies or prophecies? Sometimes I feel him grumble inside me, like some great bearish Zorba with an immense love for life and a hero's willingness to die, and I know that I must be a disappointment to him. How could I not be? The further we move away from the hopes and struggles of our ancestors, the harder it is for us to remember exactly what we owe them and exactly what they wanted us to achieve.

Mahatma Gandhi once wrote that all history is "the record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love."<sup>19</sup> Another way of saying this is that history is the accumulated sins of the fathers visited upon the sons, shadows playing on the cave of tainted memories, a nightmare from which we are all trying to awake. And yet if the transcendental source of life's time-bound particulars are inevitably tainted by human greed, and if our shared humanity is always hidden behind a veil of prejudices, wars, and chronicles of strife, this does not mean that a common human freedom is not available to us, only that it is as yet unnamed.

It is in this process of naming our collective identity that the significance of our lives together will be defined, and if we are not careful, if we don't listen to our poets and visionaries or honor the heroism of our precursors and the wisdom of the poor or take seriously the cries of the victims and the outcasts, we will end up oscillating between a preoccupation with our own personal desires and a superstitious faith in nineteenth-century scientific materialism that passes for conventional sanity.

We have to do better than that.

### Breaking the Cultural Trance

Whatever our technological achievements or economic gains, it is time that we own up to the fact that this world remains a purgatory—a spiritual diaspora where most people live in abject poverty and the best among us are all too often lost, exiled, left for dead, or buried at sea.

We also now know that our DNA is not that different from that of the higher primates. And I suspect that any qualitative divergence between the animals and us will prove not to be physical so much as subjective,

revelatory, and prophetic: the product of a mysterious event, an originating moment, a change in collective perception that initiated the ritual of language, that ongoing dance signifying our belonging to one another.<sup>20</sup>

But if such a revelatory anthropology is going to dismantle the empty talk of ideological wrangling, there will have to be a generation or two of willing outsiders who consciously live in the silences of our epoch, bidding their time in communion with the sacred. And I suspect that such souls will look a lot like more like stoic firemen, unintelligible scientists, unread poets, and jobless immigrants than well-paid professionals, overpaid CEOs, or politically correct movie stars—not because these folk possess any innate moral superiority to their more successful peers but because their anonymity renders them less susceptible to the cultural trance that dominates the lives of the accomplished.

The young will have to be rescued from teachers and parents who inoculate them against their own nascent inwardness by emphasizing the “performances” of experts over the presence of virtue and by forcing them to endure the petty dramas of the self-satisfied as their only model of intellectual achievement. Such a rescue may require a New Theory of the Classroom or a New Theory of the Book or even a New Theory of the Self<sup>21</sup>—something that will reinvigorate the Emersonian idea that thinking is an act of sustained nonconformity, not a display of intellectual virtuosity.

Contemporary scholars and academics have been very little help in creating such practices or encouraging such contrarian thoughts. The forms of criticism and analysis taught at our universities today just carry dialectics to its ultimate conclusion in deconstruction, the new historicism, and other forms of ideological critique.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the most progressive academics actually argue that we must bring everything into dialogue with ideology.<sup>23</sup> If I am even partly correct in my account of contemporary trends, we need exactly the reverse procedure: to subsume ideology within a more contemplative tradition, perhaps even a return to *lectio divina*, prayer, and meditation as preferred ways of knowing. If anything, we need to place the truths of revelation at the center of our educational and cultural enterprises.

But since such an approach has been advocated by a number of shallow religious extremists, it suffers from the superficial familiarity and special pleading that plagues so many contemporary expressions of Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. Not that these traditions don't have their serious exponents; it's just that the widespread “dumbing down” that all three have suffered hampers them from establishing the kind of serious philosophical foundation that a new humanities needs to ground

itself. Without a convincing philosophical anthropology to serve as its base—that is to say, without an inclusive vision of what it means to be a human being—the attempt to put the search for virtue at the center of our cultural enterprises simply cannot take place. Somehow we must find a way to overcome our fascination with scientific and materialist reductionism in order to tap into the pagan, lyric pedagogy that animated the Psalms and all the rest of our poetry without drowning in the heady wine of Dionysian irrationality or popular sentimentality.

Giambattista Vico's *New Science*, written at the turn of the eighteenth century, may seem like the precursor to the kind of thing I am advocating here: a felt and imagined metaphysics to replace the abstract ponderings of our philosophers, a return to divination, "a rational civil theology of divine providence."<sup>24</sup> We can see this kind of speculative poetic thinking in the reflections of people like Joseph Campbell and the post-Jungian psychotherapist James Hillman. But then again, it isn't exactly a new mythopoetics that we need, and despite Robert Bly's spirited attempts to invigorate the tradition of the deep image, his attempt at reestablishing the transcendental roots of American culture remain more instructive as a false start than anything else.

Nor is the neoconservative suggestion that we teach virtue any better. We can't teach virtue without practicing it, and practicing virtue is not a performance or a political stance but a creative breakthrough. It manifests itself in a revelation of the good, not in a repetition of the known. It isn't just Nietzschean relativism that has rendered the modern academy damaging to the souls of the young; it's also the positivist, ahistorical classicism that is offered as its only alternative.

This is why we need a refreshed sense of contemporary culture that takes into account the post-Enlightenment awareness that the "real world" is not only what exists outside of us but also what is within us—at one with our own inner ground.<sup>25</sup> And that we share this ground with other human beings whenever we are present to our freedom and the freedom of others. Without knowledge of this shared metaphysical reality, others remain an impenetrable mystery; the natural world becomes a patient etherized on a table, and we remain an enigma to ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

The difficulties we face as Americas are not the product of a clash of civilizations or the rift between Western democracies and Eastern despots. The conflict is where it has always been: in the clash between our true and our false selves, between our desire to control and manipulate life and our desire to throw off every form of internal and external tyranny, as our forefathers yearned to do. As I get older, I see the young rushing through a world I once rushed through—blinded by their hope of better things to

come, in a hurry, always looking forward. And I want to tell them to slow down, that the world they carry around on their shoulders is not the real world, and that living fully is not a matter of building for the future, collecting memories, or even kissing the joy as it flies. Rather it is a matter of accompanying existence as a beloved companion whose subjectivity can never be fully comprehended or sufficiently understood.

Life is not a project to be completed or a debt to be paid; it is a long-lost relative longing for attention, friendship, and care. I guess I am old enough now to admit that none of my failures ever really mattered. Or else their consequences usually turned out better than what would have happened had I got what I wanted. Defeat humbles us and prepares us to receive other things down the line. In fact, I think it would be fair to say that the best things in life always come to us unexpectedly as gifts, unearned, gratuitous as rain. Whenever I tried to be somebody or force the moment to its crisis, I suffered the inevitable consequences, but whenever I let life lead me, I wised up.

But before I could wise up, my false ambitions had to be exposed as illusions, not pandered to. Somebody had to tell me—in words or images that penetrated my defenses—that the end of all my striving should not be material success but true life. And that true life was an interior accomplishment, the product of a lifetime of revelations, not the answer to a question or the end result of an unwavering adherence to some single set of prescribed virtues.

Perhaps the reason we deepen as we age is that over time we are all forced to leave parts of our lives behind and become different people. These losses reveal—even to the most hardheaded among us—the tentative and fictive nature of our own felt identities. Such disillusionment can breed cynicism, but if we trust that there is a reality behind the flux of experience—an enduring pattern, a transpersonal transcendental self—these changes can also be liberating by helping us distinguish fact from fiction and dream from reality.

It may take years of being drawn into flame after flame of various self-generated passions before we can acquire the humility to relax into the life actually given us and accept a destiny more mysterious than any we could ever have imagined for ourselves—rising from the ashes of our self-manufactured illusions to become resolute champions of the actual. But this is possible only to the extent that we see “the actual” in a transcendental light—hence the need for a poetic, visionary rendering of the American dream.

I once heard a speaker remark that the historians had gotten the story of African America all wrong. The life of Martin Luther King Jr., he said,

proves that blacks were not brought over here by whites to be slaves *but sent over here by God to change the world*. Such an observation bespeaks the incommensurable distance between the language of fact and the language of revelation, between America as history and America as metaphor. To deepen the dream, we must hold both truths in our minds simultaneously without immediately reaching after some slogan or theory to collapse the paradox. We are both better and worse than we know, our future is more horrific and more graced than we can ever imagine, and our past is still with us in ways we have yet to surmise. The truths of our religious traditions do not contract the sciences that diverge from them or the political innovations devised to contain them but rather hold their ground as parts of ourselves still seeking integration into the unfolding “brave new world.”

This essay has been, to a large extent, an exercise in pattern recognition and moral invention. I have tried to discern certain emerging forms of conscience and their comings and goings in the minds of Americans caught up in the storms of current social changes. If there is a thesis here, it is that depth is not merely complexity; it is also specificity—an active resistance to vague generalities in a constant search for ever more particular, one-of-a-kind revelations into life, capable of liberating untapped human potential by initiating us into new, hitherto unimaginable, universes of discourse.

The new American history will not be the fragmented story of previously marginalized groups vying for power and recognition, but the story of the excluded universal self finding its way independently and free. The young often experience this self as an untapped energy hovering about them in the antechambers of their lives, waiting to make its appearance in the form of some new lover, superstar, or hero. But it never appears that way because the true self isn't defined from without.

The cultural trance is a product of the mass media, government, Big Money, and terrorism, and so the true self will return, as it always has, in private, inward events inside the souls of particular individuals. It returns only in moments of revelation.



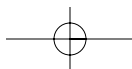
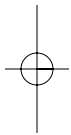
## Notes

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- 1 The key text for this is John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630).
- 2 For a more detailed and eloquent development of this idea, see Jacob Needleman, *The American Soul: Recovering the Wisdom of the Founders* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002).
- 3 Whitman was given this name by the critic Harold Bloom.
- 4 In an essay in the April 2002 issue of *Harper’s*, “The Numbing of the American Mind,” Thomas de Zengotita quotes Nietzsche to describe the psychological pressures experienced by our young: “In the youthful soul the massive influx of impressions is so great; surprising, barbaric, and violent things press so overpoweringly—‘balled up into hideous clumps’—that it can save itself only by taking recourse in premeditated stupidity” (p. 33). And in our time, this premeditated stupidity takes the form of MTV.
- 5 The novelist Milan Kundera calls the phenomenon the “modernization of stupidity” and has written about it in his collection of essays and lectures *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Grove Press, 1988).
- 6 See, among other works, Tolstoy’s “Confession,” in *The Portable Tolstoy*, ed. John Bayley (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).
- 7 The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration reported in 1999 that depression and anxiety disorders affect nineteen million Americans annually and that up to one-half of all visits to primary care physicians are due to conditions that are caused or exacerbated by mental or emotional problems. See <http://www.samhsa.gov>.
- 8 See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politic and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

- 9 I tell the whole story of my initiation to the art of classroom teaching in *Spitwad Sutras: Classroom Teaching as Sublime Vocation* (Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1993).
- 10 Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 83.
- 11 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in Nina Baym (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, shorter 6th ed. (New York: Norton, 2003), p. 543.
- 12 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (Chicago: Regnery, 1965), p. 2.
- 13 Norman Mailer once advised President Kennedy that one of the best things he could do for the country would be to go on television and talk off the cuff, in a unprepared, honest way about literature, history, and philosophy in order to demonstrate to the American public what a real "American scholar" looks like. Given Kennedy's popularity, Mailer argued, this would establish a new intellectual standard for American presidents. From that point forward, they would have to demonstrate true intellectual sophistication to the American public, or they would be dismissed as second-rate. It might even put an end to programmed answers and poll-driven campaigns. Needless to say, Kennedy never took him up on the proposition, and we have suffered the consequences ever since.
- 14 An argument for this new paganism can be found in Robert D. Kaplan, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* (New York: Random House, 2002).
- 15 The Founding Fathers understood that democracy was not a particularly efficient way to run a country, but it was the best way to process shared experiences and competing revelations in a manner that held open the possibility of checking and balancing the inevitable antagonisms of man. It was a means for the collective naming of things, and the Constitution was a machine for the perpetual legal and periodic mythopoetic reconstitution of the state.
- 16 I am indebted here to Eric Gans, whose brilliant work in generative anthropology takes off from René Girard's work in new and very promising directions.
- 17 See Eliot's *Notes Toward a Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949).
- 18 Andrei Codrescu has written a probing analysis of this phenomenon in his collection of essays *The Disappearance of the Outside* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1990).

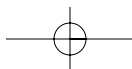
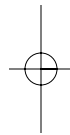
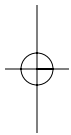
- 19 Krishna Kripalani, ed., *All Men Are Brothers* (Ahmedabad, India: Navajivan, 1960), p. 83.
- 20 Eric Gans argues for this in his book *The Origin of Language* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). But he makes an even more succinct case for this view in *Science and Faith: An Anthropology of Revelation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990).
- 21 This was the central theme of my book, *Spitwad Sutras*.
- 22 One notable exception here is Parker Palmer's work developing "circles of trust." Based on the Quaker idea of an assisted examination of conscience, individuals come together not to debate or even discuss problems but to help individuals discern what their conscience is telling them. See, for example, Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).
- 23 See, for example, Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
- 24 *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1968), para. 342.
- 25 I am thinking here of a host of postmodernist philosophers and thinkers as diverse as Paul Ricoeur, Hans Gadamer, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida, who agree that the ground of our rationality cannot be simply assumed and that Western metaphysics is the mere beginning of thought, not its grand finale.
- 26 Huston Smith makes this point in his book *Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).



## *The Author*

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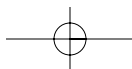
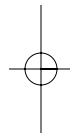
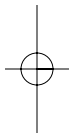


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