

Title: THE SPIRIT OF DISOBEDIENCE.

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### THE SPIRIT OF DISOBEDIENCE :An invitation to resistance

According to our leading wise men, the great contemporary moral and political question of the age is: Are we fundamentally a Christian or an Enlightenment culture? Boards of education and lawmakers in states like Kansas, Pennsylvania, and Missouri rock from election to election between advocacy of a Christian doctrine of "intelligent design" and a secular and scientific commitment to evolution. In editorial pages across the country, ordinary people earnestly debate whether or not it was the intention of the "Founding Fathers" (whose authority is second only to God's in these matters) to found a Christian nation. Although these grassroots debates often seem merely silly and ill-informed (the comical idolatry for these "Fathers"; the failure to understand that most of them were Deists), this division in our character often has deeper and more troubling consequences. For instance, consider the case of the People of Colorado v. Harlan, in which a court threw out the sentence of a man who had been given the death penalty because jurors had consulted the Bible in reaching a verdict. The court argued that the jury should have avoided "extraneous prejudicial materials" such as newspaper articles, television programs--or, in this case, the Bible. Last year the Colorado Supreme Court upheld the decision, reasoning that "'Holy Scripture' has factual and legal import for many citizens" in that community and thus was prejudicial. A further complication was that Colorado law expects jurors to make an "individual moral assessment" in death penalty cases. Aside from the obvious difficulty of consulting the Bible for unambiguous moral guidance (If you read Leviticus you get one answer; if you read Matthew you get another. String him up or turn the other cheek? Flip a coin?), what is truly astonishing here is the idea that the average citizen can make "individual moral assessments" without recourse to his or her religious beliefs. Not in this culture they couldn't. It isn't enough to say that the court's decision is incoherent, which it certainly is. The interesting thing about this case is that the incoherence so perfectly captures a national confusion about the relation of Christian to Enlightenment thought.

What's doubly strange is that Americans should follow with such fascination and intensity this old dispute over our national character while entirely ignoring the dominant ethos of our culture for the last two hundred years. It should go without saying that it is capitalism that most defines our national character, not Christianity or the Enlightenment. (Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations--with its arguments for

the good of the division of labor, the good of money, and the preeminent good of free trade--was published, after all, in 1776.) As Henry Osborne Havemeyer, president of the sugar trust, acknowledged in 1899, "Business is not a philanthropy.... I do not care two cents for your ethics. I don't know enough of them to apply them.... As a business proposition it is right to get all out of a business that you possibly can."

And so as the judges and juries in Colorado struggle with their confusion over what system of ethical values to apply to a case, the very nature of the system in which they function goes unexamined. It is, I hardly need to rehearse, a system in which poor people are at a grotesque disadvantage. Justice, under capitalism, works not from a notion of obedience to moral law, or to conscience, or to compassion, but from the assumption of a duty to preserve a social order and the legal "rights" that constitute that order, especially the right to property and the freedom to do with it what one wants. That's the real and important "moral assessment" sought by our courts. It comes to this: that decision will seem most just which preserves the system of justice even if the system is itself routinely unjust.

Capitalism has not believed and does not believe in the authority of Christ's spiritual vision nor does it feel constrained by Kant's Enlightenment ethic, which argued that human beings should be treated as ends, not means. It can't even be said to believe in utilitarianism's calculating approach to benefit: "the greatest good for the greatest number." Such a precept causes good capitalists a sort of painful suspicion that they might be distracted from the immediate goal of maximizing profit. Just how many of these others do I have to benefit? I understand that I am not the keeper of my brothers, at least not all of them, but why should I keep ANY of them?

Most of what we perceive to be the social losses, the reversals of New Deal social programs, under the Reagan/Bush revolutions is simply capitalism adjusting in its own favor the sliding scale of utilitarian benefit. "That's enough," says Capital, "the rest are on their own." In the end, it only believes in the sanctity of profitable returns to stockholders, to whom there is no greater pledge of moral fealty, if one is to believe our nation's chief executive officers. That is the only certain morality of the so-called Free Market. "Our stockholders deserve a return on the investment they have entrusted with us, and we are honor-bound to maximize that return," say our captains of industry on CNBC or FOX or Wall Street Week or even The Nightly Business Report on PBS, a little tear of commitment welling in the corner of their eyes. They do not trouble themselves to try to operate under what John Ruskin called "conditions of moral culture," whether Christian or Enlightenment. Compassion is at most something for private consideration

as charity, though even that must be made economically rational as a tax deduction.

And yet in spite of all of this, which should be evident to any half-attentive American, capitalism has managed somehow to convince the people subject to it that in fact the truest religious people (the real Christians, as they think) are its strongest advocates. As a consequence, our political options have been turned into a deadly game of either/or. You're either a Christian Republican or a secular Democrat. Revelation or Reason. While Christians lament the loss of traditional moral values, confirmed secularists angrily decry the decay of Enlightenment civic principles.

It is strange that this opposition should seem so new and newsworthy to us. We have lost sight of just how old these differences are. In early postcolonial America, there was already a division between the "coast and the hinterlands," in Van Wyck Brooks's phrase. In the hinterlands, Puritan discipline and extremity still reigned, and the fire-and-brimstone preaching of the new evangelical orders (inspired by Methodism's John Wesley) was on the rise. But on the coast the "Boston religion," Unitarianism, had triumphed and exerted a great liberalizing and moderating influence on American life and thought. It was the coastal elitism of enlightened self-reliance led by Harvard College versus the abject rural conviction of sinfulness before an angry God. Sound familiar? And yet this is a description of 1820. Neither is it a strictly American problem. When, during the French Revolution, the Assembly nationalized the property of the Church in the name of the natural rights of man, they created what was called the "two Frances," one secular and one loyal to its Catholic past. Or consider 1517. As Jacques Barzun writes of the antagonism between the Lutherans and the advocates of Erasmus's Christian humanism, "The Evangelicals despised the Humanists." Our own red state/blue state dilemma is really that old and that generalized throughout Western culture.

Still, the ironies of the present are many and profound and not to be explained away by a sense of historical inevitability. Do Democrats really imagine that they can articulate a compelling moral vision for the United States or for the democratic West without a spiritual foundation? Does someone like Robert Reich (author of *Reason: Why Liberals Will Win the Battle for America*) really believe that he can succeed where Kant and the Enlightenment failed in establishing an ethics and a politics of Reason? Or, worse, do Democrats really imagine that they can compete with Republican evangelicals by becoming more like them? Shall we all talk about our born-again justification in the body of Christ? Shall we all head down to the river to collect our votes?

Or, ironies on the other side, do Christian Republicans truly not understand the fundamental ways in which an unfettered corporate capitalism betrays Christ's ethical vision and their own economic well-being? (It is an astonishing irony that many of these religious anti-Darwinians are in their politics and economics the most uncompromising Social Darwinians, with a naive and self-defeating assumption of the virtue of competition. Of course, the people of "lowest development" to be "weeded out," as Herbert Spencer put it, are demonstrably themselves!) Most fantastically, do Christian Republicans really not recognize their own perverse marriage with secular rationalism? Or that there is an unacknowledged alliance between the pragmatic, ultra-rational needs of corporate capitalism and the blarney of Christian cleansing through the "social values" movement?

In the end, evangelical Christianity conspires with technical and economic rationalism. In the end, they both require a commitment to "duty" that masks unspeakable violence and injustice. In the end, the Muslim whose legs are being reduced to pulp by his American tormentor doesn't care if he's being murdered because he is despised by Christians or because he is an impediment to economic rationality. He understands far better than we do how the two become one at the end of the torturer's rod. The Predator missile, product of American scientific ingenuity, that homes in on his head is both self-righteously and arrogantly evangelical and meanly pragmatic. It is the empire that the rest of the world reads in George Bush's smirk. As John Ruskin understood 150 years ago, "The only question (determined mostly by fraud in peace, and force in war) is, Who is to die, and how?"

If we live in a "culture of death," as Pope John Paul II put it, it is a culture that is made possible by the advocates of both Reason and Revelation. In the opposition of Reason to Revelation, death cannot lose. Ours is a culture in which death has taken refuge in a legality that is supported by both reasonable liberals and Christian conservatives. Our exploitation of humans as "workers" is legal and somehow, weird and perverse though it may seem, generally acknowledged as part of our heritage of freedom, and virtually the entire political spectrum falls over itself to praise it. When Wal-Mart pays its employees impoverishing wages without adequate health or retirement benefits, we justify it out of respect for Wal-Mart's "freedom," its "reasonable" need to make itself "competitive," and because what it does is legal. As George Whalin, president of Retail Management Consultants, put it, "They don't have a responsibility to society to pay a higher wage than the law says you have to pay." Similarly, our use of the most fantastically destructive military power is also legal and also somehow a part of our heritage of "protecting freedom," no matter how obscene and destructive its excesses. The grotesque violence of video games and

Hollywood movies, doing God knows what to the "individual morality" of teenagers, is legal and somehow now a protected part of our freedom of expression. Even, as the more thoughtful anti-abortionists complain with some justice, the legality of abortion at times covers over an attitude toward human life that subjects life to the low logic of efficiency and convenience. The idea of abortion as a minor "medical procedure" becomes Orwellian in its intense determination not to "know what we do." Or, perhaps most destructively, the legality of property rights condemns nature itself to annihilation even as we call it the freedom to pursue personal happiness and prosperity through the ownership of private property. This legality formalizes and empowers our famous "unalienable right" to property (especially that most peculiar form of private property known as the corporation), the exercise of which will profoundly alienate those on whom this right is inflicted: workers, children, foreign enemies, and animals. In its most extreme and universal form, our constitutional rights are reducible to the right not to have to love our neighbor. The irony is that the more energetically we pursue our individual, socially isolated right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the deader the social and natural worlds become.

And yet for all the inevitability that surrounds the Christian/Enlightenment divide, it should not be so difficult for us to find a third option in our intellectual traditions, even if this tradition seems mostly defeated and lost. It is a tradition that is spiritual and yet hostile to the orthodoxies of institutional Christianity. It is the creation of the Enlightenment and yet it is suspicious of the claims of Reason, especially that form of Reason, economic rationalism, that defines capitalism. This tradition began in Europe with Romanticism and in America with the Concord Transcendentalists. Together they created a sort of "counter-Enlightenment" in the West. At its origin is the poetic system devised by William Blake in the late eighteenth century. In this system there was, to be sure, condemnation of the backward-looking institution of the Christian Church, but there was also condemnation of the figure of Enlightenment rationalism, what Blake called Ratio. Christianity, for Blake, bled from Jesus his real substance as prophet/poet. Reason, or Ratio, on the other side, born with the scientific revolution, divided the world from the self, the human from the natural, the inside from the outside, and the outside itself into ever finer degrees of manipulable parts. From Blake's point of view, both religion and reason were deeply antihuman, destructive errors.

Blake's third term, the place he called home, was the Imagination. Blake's use of the Imagination is not exotic. Ralph Waldo Emerson's richly American thought was deeply dependent on the Romantic tradition that Blake began. Sounding every bit the descendant of Blake, Emerson

wrote in his essay "Self-Reliance," "The inquiry leads us to that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue, and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct. We denote this primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions." For Emerson as well as Blake, Jesus was the supreme prophet and poet who had realized the full creative capacities of every human. In the Church, on the other hand, "the soul is not preached." In the Church, our instincts are trampled. The Church is a dead thing. As shocking as these ideas still sound to us, they represent a fundamental American tradition that ought to be as much a part of our usable heritage as the moral severity that was left to us by Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards and that is preached to this day by the Pat Robertsons of the world and implemented with extremity (and cynicism) by politicians like Texas Representative Tom DeLay. In contrast to institutional Christianity, whether dull Unitarians or fiery Evangelicals, Emerson imagined that the world is held together by a spirit that is not of the Church, and certainly not of Reason, but of a direct experience of the world. Emerson made this Romantic idea American, and he gave it first to Henry David Thoreau, then to Whitman, and through Whitman to Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, and to so many fractured movements of the recent past and present: the '60s counterculture, the environmental movement, and New Age spiritualism, in particular. They are the heirs to the Imagination's counter-Enlightenment, with its contempt for the hierarchical authority of the Church and its deep suspicion of what was unleashed by Enlightenment Reason.

As Hegel famously suggested, speaking of phrenologists in particular and empiricism in general, some people are capable of regarding a bone as reality. In the absence of the Imagination, our sense of the real has ossified. It's like a great thighbone on the ends of which are our inevitable bulbous realities-in-opposition, the Christian and scientific worldviews. What the Imagination seeks is an opportunity. It seeks a moment when the dry bone of the real is just for a moment "out of joint," as Shakespeare's Hamlet put it, so that it can assert its difference. In the fraudulent Manichaeism of Reason and Revelation, each the light to the other's dark, each more like the other than it knows, the Imagination seeks to be a decisive rupture.

Henry David Thoreau found his time so much "out of joint" that he concluded that it was better to cease to exist than to continue in corruption and injustice. As he writes in "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience": "The people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people." For Thoreau, the moral bearing of the state had reached a point where he was forced to conclude that it was no longer itself. As a consequence, Thoreau was not a citizen of the state of Massachusetts. As he put it in a statement

to his town clerk: "Know all men by these presents, that I, Henry Thoreau, do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined."

For Thoreau, when the time was out of joint, when the state had failed its own idea of itself, he felt a necessity to remove himself from it, to refuse its social order, in spite of the personal price he would have to pay for the gesture. What's striking in the example that Thoreau offers us is how familiar his enormous and tragic sense of betrayal is. For us, too, things seem out of joint. America is not America. When the Bush/ Cheney Administration orchestrated a war in Iraq, many of us said, and continue to say, "Not in my name." This is the equivalent of saying, "Your society is not one that I have willingly joined. You may not proceed as if I were one with you."

This gesture of self-alienation is the first moment of disobedience. But we should see that it is not a "revolutionary" disobedience. Thoreau's disobedience is disobedience as refusal. I won't live in your world. I will live as if your world has ended, as indeed it deserves to end. I will live as if my gesture of refusing your world has destroyed it. Or we might say, hopefully, as Paul says in Corinthians I, that "the present form of the world is passing away." Thoreau's famous retreat to Walden Pond is thus in a continuum with his sense of the duty of disobedience. He argued that "under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison." Less self-destructively, we might say that Thoreau concluded that you might find a just man outside, at Walden Pond, in a self-created exile that is also the expression of a desire for the next world. He understood this exile as the need to create a society--even if a society of one on the banks of a tiny Massachusetts pond--that he could willingly join.

Henry David Thoreau's idea of disobedience is not only about an antisocial unruliness; it is also the expression of a desire for the spiritual. In this he is unlike the tradition of secular liberalism that has failed us so miserably (and so recently) in the policies and campaigns of the Democratic Party. It is not about a purely secular or political ethic that "reasonable" legislators can take care of if we can just elect the right people, especially since the legality they would confer would surely also have about it the stink of death. Thoreau's disobedience is mostly about spirit.

Walden is a work of Christ-like thinking. That is, Thoreau was intent on confronting a culture that he perceived as being death-in-life with an appeal to life both temporal and transcendental. In the end, Thoreau was not interested only in making economies with his little handmade household on Walden Pond; he was just as interested in making eternity.

Thoreau has something critical to teach us, if we'd let him, about the relation of the personal to the public and of the spiritual to the political. But he's mostly not available to us. He is shut away with a lot of other books in the virtuous and therapeutic confines of literary and historic institutions. He peers out to us from the pages of his book as another defeated man, another dead white male, as the professors say these days. Our question is whether we any longer know how to retrieve our own traditions from their institutional entombment. This can't be done by teaching *Walden* in high school. "Saved" by the American literary canon, Thoreau is a mere dead letter. Thoreau can only be retrieved if we find a way to integrate his thought into the way we live as a sort of counterlife opposed to the busywork of the legality of the culture of death. But what is his thought? How would he argue to us if he could?

Thoreau was no Marxist, but he was, like Marx, appalled by what work did to human beings. And by and large Thoreau was aware of this human damage without the benefit of experiencing the grim reality of the nineteenth-century English factory. Most of his examples are agrarian, and so his conclusions surprise us, his twenty-first-century readers, because we tend to look back at our agrarian past as a kind of utopia lost. What Marx and Thoreau shared with Christ was a sense that "the letter killeth." What killed was not the letter as Mosaic Law but as secular "legality." Legality had so saturated the human world that it stood before it as a kind of second nature. But it was a false nature that brought not life but death. The culture of death understood as legality is what Paul Ricoeur (borrowing from Kant) calls "radical evil." Radical evil is not the individual act of malicious intent; it is the world and its system into which we are born. We take this world up as our own, as if it were our duty to do so.

The opening pages of Thoreau's *Walden* are devoted to describing this radical evil, the world into which he was born. "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad, and if I repent of anything, it is very likely to be my good behavior. What demon possessed me that I behaved so well?" The primary good of which Thoreau repented was the virtue of work. In work we do what is not good. The world of discipline in work is, for Thoreau, a morally inverted world. It is human nature standing on its head. It is what Thoreau sought to convert. Again like Marx, Thoreau saw much of the horror of work in the way it incorporated the human into the machine.

I see young men, my townsmen, whose misfortune is to have inherited farms, houses, barns, cattle, and farming tools; for these are more easily acquired than got rid of. . . . Why should they begin digging their graves as soon as they are born? . . . But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost.

This is perhaps not a view of the grim English factory that Marx had in mind, but it is enough to allow Thoreau to say, "But lo! men have become the tools of their tools" and have "no time to be anything but a machine."

It is the money-form, as Marx called it, that has captured and distorted a more human notion of time. Time, for Homo economicus, is not "the stream I go a-fishing in." It is a medium of exchange. We trade our time for money. Our houses themselves become, in time, mere potential for exchange, or accumulated "equity," as our bankers tell us. The true cost of a thing, Thoreau shrewdly observes, condensing hundreds of pages of Marxist analysis to an epigram, is "the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run." Money does not fool Thoreau. Money always wears the face of the boss. It represents the loss of freedom and ultimately the loss of self. One is not human in the unequal world of work for exchange. One is compost in the making.

All of this makes what we actually do with money tragic (and stupid). We sacrifice our lives so that we can buy "shoestrings." Most of the things we buy are not only necessities but hindrances. Instead of considering what a house is, how it serves us, and learning how to make one, we shut ourselves in a suburban box. Our home becomes a part of death: "The spirit having departed out of the tenant, it is of a piece with constructing his own coffin--the architecture of the grave--and 'carpenter' is but another name for 'coffin-maker.'" Mass these coffins together in neighborhoods and we soon come to resent our neighbors as if they were to blame for our shared cemetery. What we might not see so clearly is that "the bad neighborhood to be avoided is our own scurvy selves." Consider the vinyl-clad subdivision nearest you. No argument is needed to complete this thought.

Similar though Marx and Thoreau may be in their accounts of the consequences of living in a society defined by money, their suggestions for how to respond to it are poles apart. Forget the Party. Forget the revolution. Forget the general strike. Forget the proletariat as an abstract class of human interest. Thoreau's revolution begins not with discovering comrades to be yoked together in solidarity but with the embrace of solitude. For Thoreau, Marx's first and fatal error was the creation of the aggregate identity of the proletariat. Error was substituted for error. The anonymity and futility of the worker were replaced by the anonymity and futility of the revolutionary. A revolution conducted by people who have only a group identity can only replace one monolith of power with another, one misery with another, perpetuating the cycle of domination and oppression. In solitude, the

individual becomes most human, which is to say most spiritual.

Having first taken the famous step of stripping his life of the extraneous, reducing it to "simplicity, simplicity, simplicity!" and committing himself to solitude, Thoreau reveals that his real purpose is "ethereal."

It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life.

This ethereal realm is not the result of any familiar or formal religious practice. The ethereal is gained by simply doing one thing, consciously. "I made no haste in my work, but rather made the most of it," said Thoreau. What is divine is simply being attentive to what you are doing in the moment you are doing it, assuming that that thing is not merely stupid (i.e., anything you have to do to receive money), or reflective of a life that is "frittered away by detail" (a good description of a country of double- and triple-taskers, driving a car while talking on a cell phone, the local classic rock station wailing through the Bose speakers, while wiping the baby's nose, with the Classifieds on your lap, all the while thinking of where you'll eat for dinner). Thoreau recommends simply being "awake" to what is in front of you. As one of his "rude" country visitors to Walden put it, "May be the man you hoe with is inclined to race; then, by gory, your mind must be there; you think of weeds." Instead of emptying oneself out into work (virtue), routinized work hollows out the worker from the inside (debasement).

As a spiritual and poetic economics deeply unlike Marx's "political economy," Thoreau's thinking emphasizes drift. As Thoreau puts it, his life required a "broad margin" for drifting, for trusting to an intuition of what comes next. If one objects that drifting does not allow for a national economy of millions of people, Thoreau's answer is probably that the very idea of a nation is a bad idea. A state is a "desperate odd-fellow society" made up of "dirty institutions." There is no nation that one can join in good conscience, not while it sells humans "like cattle, at the door of its senate-house." If we wish to reduce the exploitation that is the essence of money, then we need less money, not more. A national culture based on the universalizing of money and ever more possessions is ultimately, as we say now, "unsustainable." Which is a euphemistic way of saying that it is a culture bent on making provision for its own death. We are always busily providing for our own defeat.

Thoreau's idea of civil disobedience is embedded in the counter-Enlightenment of Romanticism, Transcendentalism, and the Imagination, and it is, like Christ's revolution, an appeal for Life over Death. How right the anti-abortionists are to urge us to "choose life," but how wrong they are to imagine that the culture of death is limited to abortion. Our entire disposition toward one another and toward Being, that supreme "given" that we call the world of nature, is a disposition to death. Thoreau was the first to recognize the spiritual, intellectual, and economic tendency of America toward a culture of death, but he was also the first to begin to think about the hopefulness of reclaiming life. For Thoreau, the most basic question to ask of a society is, What kind of human beings does it produce? His answer was not optimistic. "We are a race of tit-men, and soar but little higher in our intellectual flights than the columns of the daily paper." The ethical health of Concord, Massachusetts, had nothing to do with the presence of a glowing sign reading "Glory to God in the highest," or the din of "testifying" that the Evangelicals insisted upon, and it did not have to do with material "prosperity." For Thoreau, it had only to do with a spiritual presence about which one cannot speak at all! "What is religion?" Thoreau asked in his journal. "That which is never spoken." But when this spirit and its silent persuasion is missing, the community is capable of great and violent stupidity. So what, Thoreau would ask, does it mean to say that in our community young people are asked to grow up into the following: you will abandon your private intelligence in the name of public stupidity (patriotism, in particular) in order to do something as dubious as learning to kill other humans? And yet this is what passes as virtue in our own time and what passed for virtue in Thoreau's. As George Santayana wrote, "Why practice folly heroically and call it duty? Because conscience bids. And why does conscience bid that? Because society and empire require it." Put more spiritually, as Simone Weil does, "Evil when we are in its power is not felt as evil but as a necessity, or even a duty."

There is a line in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Representative Men that begins to capture my sense of what is necessary to confront our culture of duty and legality: "What is best written or done by genius, in the world, was no man's work, but came by wide social labor, when a thousand wrought like one, sharing the same impulse." So the question we might ask of the future is, "When will we again share the same impulse?" Now, this might sound like a merely self-absorbed wondering after and waiting for the next zeitgeist, the next Age, the return of the '60s counterculture. It will certainly disappoint the more practical and ideological on the left. But I would contend that what is needed is not simply the overthrowing of the present corrupt system in the name of an alternative political machinery that will provide something like "authentic participatory democracy." The appeal of this familiar leftist position

is that it can tell you what needs to be done NOW: Take to the streets. Overthrow state power. But I think that part of our reluctance to share this particular revolutionary impulse is that we remember the little Lenins and their big ideas, and we remember where these guys led us: group gropes on the Weathermen bus as a prelude to bombing a post office. Or, worse than that, endless boring meetings with the next "progressive" Democratic candidate who is going to "turn this country around" and "return it to the people." Right. All you really need to ask the John Kerrys or Howard Deans of the world is where they stand on free-market trade issues. They're all ultimately for it, the whole complex scheme of World Banks, NAFTA, WTO, etc. And they're for it out of a sense of duty to "national interest," "jobs for working people," or whatever other shameful thing it is that they use to paper over violence. The rest--corporatism, militarism, environmental disaster, human disaster--follows automatically.

So what should we do if we can't look to the self-styled revolutionaries and the establishment progressives? Thoreau's suggestion should still be ours: a return to the fundamentals of being human.

The Imagination has always called for a return to the truest fundamentalism contained in the question "What does it mean to be a human being?" Needless to say, this is a question that deserves the deepest and most patient development. It will have to suffice for the present to say that our reigning social reality forbids--structurally, politically, violently--the broad posing of this question. If we could pose the question, and Thoreau were allowed to answer, his answer would imply at least three things: First, a refusal of the world as it stands. Second, a recommitment to fundamentals. What does it mean for a human being to need a house? Food? Clothing? Is the prefabricated suburban box a human home? (Ruskin called these fundamentals "valuable material things," and his list is strikingly similar to Thoreau's: land and house, food and clothing, books and works of art.) Third, an understanding that to stand before the question of these fundamentals requires spirit. Thoreau called it awareness. I make my home with this plank. I make my food with this seed. This awareness is really a form of prayer, and our culture is nearly bereft of it. As Simone Weil--perhaps the strangest and most unlikely Thoreauvian solitary, outcast, and transcendentalist of all--wrote, echoing Thoreau's sense of awareness: "The authentic and pure values--truth, beauty, and goodness--in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object." Or, more tersely yet: "Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer."

It is perhaps the saddest, most hopeless thing we can say about our culture that it is a culture of distraction. "Attention deficit" is a

cultural disorder, a debasement of spirit, before it is an ailment in our children to be treated with Ritalin.

When we can meet again, as revivalists say, and share an impulse that separates us from a state not only distracted but apparently bent on its own destruction, and when we can again confront work in a way that reconnects us spiritually with human "fundamentals," then we will have recalled life from the culture of death. Although the '60s counterculture has been much maligned and discredited, it attempted to provide what we still desperately need: a spirited culture of refusal, a counter-life to the reigning corporate culture of death. We don't need to return to that counterculture, but we do need to take up its challenge again. If the work we do produces mostly bad, ugly, and destructive things, those things in turn will tend to re-create us in their image. We need to turn to good, useful, and beautiful work. We need to ask, as Thoreau and Ruskin did, What are the life-giving things? Such important questions are answered for us in the present by the corporate state, while we are left with the most trivial decisions: what programs to watch on TV and what model car to buy.

Reclaiming the right to ask the serious questions is no doubt an invitation to utopian thinking, with all the good and bad that form of thought has always implied. But what utopian thinkers have understood best is that if utopia is "nowhere," so is every where else. "Reality," whether defined by evangelical Christians or empiricists, is a form of disenchantment. The Real, on the other hand, is up for grabs. What the earliest utopians--Montaigne, Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella--understood was that they fought not for a place but for a new set of ideas through which to recognize what would count as Real: Equality, not hierarchical authority. Individual dignity, not slavish subservience. Our preeminent problem is that we recognize the Real in what is most deadly: a culture of duty to legalities that are, finally, cruel and destructive. We need to work inventively--as Christ did, as Thoreau did--in the spirit of disobedience for the purpose of refusing the social order into which we happen to have been born and putting in its place a culture of life-giving things. In such a society, we not only could claim to be Christians; we'd actually act like Christians.

So let the Age turn, as St. Paul promised. We're well done with this world.