

CHAPTER 1. Our America

America was once the hope of the world.

But what kind of hope? More than the hope of material prosperity, although that was part of it; and more than the promise of equality and liberty, although that, too, was an important part of it. And more than safety and security, precious as these things are. The deeper hope of America was its vision of what humanity is and can become—individually and in community. It was through that vision that all the material and social promise of America took its fire and light and its voice that called to men and women within its own borders and throughout the world. America was once a great idea, and it is such ideas that move the world, that open the possibility of meaning in human life.

It has been said that any question can lead to truth if it is an aching question. For one person it may be the question of life after death, for another the problem of suffering, the causes of war and injustice. Or it may be something more personal and immediate—a profound ethical dilemma, a problem involving the whole direction of one's life. An aching question, a question that is not just a matter of curiosity or a fleeting burst of emotion, cannot be answered with old thought. Possessed by such a question, one is hungry for ideas of a very different order than the familiar categories that usually accompany us throughout our lives. One is both hungry and, at

the same time, more discriminating, less susceptible to credulity and suggestibility. The intelligence of the heart begins to call to us in our sleep.

For many of us, such is now the question of the meaning of America. But it is also an elusive question. If we consider America only as a nation, that is, as a man-made construction, then it is hard to feel any ultimacy about the problem of America. Nations, as such, come and go: Persia, Rome, Byzantium have all sunk into the ocean of time. All the empires and national states of the past have come and gone in what seems like the twinkling of an eye, though in their time each appeared to itself and to the world as strong and real and enduring. And, of course, our era has witnessed the stunning disintegration of vast collectivities: the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, the political organization of eastern Europe. Even the idea itself of “nation” may be disappearing or transmuting into what has been termed a “global web” of financial instrumentalities, electronic communication and advanced technological consumerism.

All my life I have been unable to understand or sympathize with people who seemed so passionately concerned about the preservation or enhancement of America. It had always seemed to me hypocrisy, a mask that covered the all-too-human fears for one’s personal safety or comfort, often mixed with the kind of self-righteousness that had turned me away from the religions of church and synagogue. But I was even more troubled by people who attacked America and who were always arguing about hidden conspiracies, intentional injustices that were built into “the system,” and so forth. Why, I wondered, were they not just as concerned about the human condition itself? And about their own their own incomprehensible mortal life on earth? They made me feel that I was selfish to have such questions burning in me.

And so, I was astonished and strangely joyous when I finally turned directly to studying the history of America and found almost everywhere that the men and women who carved out the ideals of America were driven by the same transcendent questions that had always been my

own as well. I began to see that for many of these men and women America meant the struggle for conditions of life under which these ultimate questions could be freely pursued.

This glimpse of the motive of the Founders was at first very fleeting and insubstantial. Time and again this perception of mine was overwhelmed by the “authority” of the accepted views about everything pertaining to America. Historical knowledge and theory, political and economic opinions about the meaning of past and present events—the old as well as the latest views about America—covered over that glimpse into the origin of the American experiment. Even the accepted views about the religious motivations of the Founders clouded the issue—in fact, these commonly accepted views were the most distracting of all. They equated the religious impulses of our forefathers with the religion I knew from my own childhood, a religion that was simply dull and oppressive.

A New Beginning

America is the fact, the symbol and the promise of a new beginning. And in human life, in our lives as they are, this possibility is among the most sacred aspects of existence. All that is old and already formed can continue to live only if it allows within itself the conditions for a new beginning. Life itself is the mysterious, incomprehensible blending of the new and the old, of what already is and what is coming into being. The question of America is there: if America loses the meaning of its existence and if, in fact, America is now the dominant cultural influence in the world, then what will become of the world? The question of America leads all of us directly into the question of the purpose and destiny of human life itself in this era.

America and the Teachings of Wisdom

The World of Ideas and the Disease of Materialism

Our world, so we see and hear on all sides, is drowning in materialism, commercialism, consumerism. But the problem is not really there. What we ordinarily speak of as materialism is a result, not a cause. The root of materialism is a poverty of ideas and the experiences they point to about the inner and the outer world of man and their relationship. Less and less does our contemporary culture have or even seek commerce with great ideas, and it is that lack that is weakening the spirit of mankind. This is the essence of materialism. Materialism is a disease of the mind starved for ideas.

Throughout history ideas of a certain kind and nature have been disseminated into the life of humanity in order to help human beings understand and feel the possibility of the deep inner change that would enable them to serve the purpose for which they were created, namely, to act in the world as conscious, individual instruments of God, the ultimate principle of reality and value. Ideas of this kind are formulated in order to have a specific range of action on the human psyche: to touch the heart as well as the intellect; to shock us into questioning our present understanding; to point us to the greatness around us in nature and the universe, and the potential greatness slumbering within ourselves; to open our eyes to the real needs of our fellow man; to confront us with our own profound ignorance and our criminal fears and egoism; to show us that we are not here for ourselves alone, but as necessary particles of divine love for man and for all of life.

These are the contours of the ancient wisdom, considered as ideas embodied in religious and philosophical doctrines, works of sacred art, literature and music and, in a very fundamental way, in indications of practical methods by which man can work, as it is said, to become what he really is. Without feeling the full range of such ideas, or sensing even a modest, but pure, trace of

them, man is bound to turn for meaning to the lawfully existing instinctive impulses within him toward physical pleasure (impulses which are meant to serve and not lead him) and to the artificially induced illusions of what the ancient wisdom calls pride or the ego with its attendant fears, hatred and servility, as well as to the ego's exploitation of the intellect in the form of a swollen overestimation of disconnected logic and purely mental knowing. *This* is the root of materialism, the cultural neurosis of an era that believes that only the external senses show us the real world and that only physical or social comfort is worth striving for. Simply put, the neurosis of materialism leads us to despair. Despair because the impulse of hope that is implanted in human nature as part of our unique consciousness, finds nothing in the world or in our concept of ourselves that carries the mark of indubitable, enduring truth and goodness, those two ultimate principles toward which the organ of hope is by nature constructed to lead us.

But no idea exists alone. Great ideas are always part of a living system of ideas, all of which are necessary for the full understanding of any one of them. When we speak of the idea of America, we are speaking of many interconnected ethical ideas, metaphysical ideas that deal with ultimate reality, and societal ideas, which all *together* offered hope to the world. The idea of America, with all that it contained within it about the moral law, nature, God and the human soul, once reflected to some extent the timeless, ancient wisdom that has guided human life since the dawn of history. America was a new and original expression, in the form of a social and political experiment, of ideas which have always been part of what may be called the great web of Truth. Explicitly and implicitly, the idea of America has resonated with this ancient, timeless wisdom and has allowed something of its power to touch the heart and mind of humanity. It is necessary to recover this resonance, this relationship, however tenuous and partial, between the teachings of wisdom and the idea of America.

What are these “teachings of wisdom”? The fact of the matter is that it is possible to discern a profound commonality at the heart and root of all the major religions and spiritual philosophies of the world. Differing in outer expression and emphasis, these age-old traditions are nourished by a single hidden current of interconnected ideas—like so many ancient trees of varied form and foliage watered by the same underground stream.

Between Two Worlds

Within this vast body of teachings about man in the universal world, several elements stand out as critical for our understanding of the idea of America. One of the most central of these elements is the idea of man as a being who exists between two worlds—an inner world of great spiritual vision and power, and an outer world of material realities and constraint. Both worlds call to him and, as long as he lives, he is obliged to give each its due. His task, his place in the scheme of creation, is to become a conscious instrument of action on earth under the aegis of divine law and love. But, in order to fulfill this role, he must work to transcend the sense of self-identity that society thrusts upon him and that prevents him from recognizing his own inner self and its power to serve the good. In this ancient teaching, freedom is understood not as the license to obey one’s desires, but as obedient submission to a deep inner law; independence is understood as the discovery of one’s own authentic self, which—also seemingly paradoxically—is a mirror of the common cosmic Selfhood; equality is understood as every human being’s right to seek the truth and to be allowed to give his or her light to the common welfare.

The idea of man’s two natures, along with some of its ethical implications, was dramatically expressed in the teaching known as Stoicism, which flourished in the early Roman Empire and which served as inspiration to Washington, Adams, Jefferson and many other of the Founding Fathers of America¹. Both the most politically powerful man of his time, the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, and one of the least powerful, the freed slave Epictetus, who was a mentor to

the Emperor, adhered to the Stoic philosophy. In this teaching, man is viewed as a being whose individual mind is meant to reflect and manifest the same all-universal and all-beneficent consciousness that creates and maintains the cosmos. At the same time, man is made to live for a finite time in a mortal body and is obliged by the true power of reason (which includes cosmic love) to care for his fellow man and to answer the moral requirements of family, society and culture—all of which are also part of the universal scheme. Although man's inner nature is cosmic, his finite life is on earth; his duties are to both the immortal presence within and, while he lives on earth, to his temporary role in the social order that is also part of the universal scheme of things. Man's task is simultaneous inner freedom and full outer engagement. In the words of Epictetus:

It is difficult [and necessary] to unite and combine these qualities—the diligence of a man who devotes himself to material things, and the constancy of one who disregards them [i.e. who is not attached to them]—yet not impossible. Otherwise, it would be impossible to be happy.ⁱⁱ

And in the words of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, speaking of the need to accept the desires and sufferings attendant upon being obliged to live in a mortal body on earth and the simultaneous duty to act according to the dictates of one's own inner God:

Nothing will happen to me which is not in conformity with the Nature of the All. [But] it depends on me to do nothing which is contrary to my god and my *daimon* [inner spirit].ⁱⁱⁱ

The Inner Meaning of Democracy

As for the idea of democracy, the Founding Fathers—Washington, Jefferson, Franklin and others—never conceived of it solely as an external form of government. The meaning of democracy was always rooted in a vision of human nature as both fallen and perfectible—inwardly fallen and inwardly perfectible. To a significant extent, democracy in its specifically

American form was created to allow men and women to seek their own higher principle within themselves. Without that inner meaning, democracy becomes, as Plato and Aristotle pointed out 2500 years ago, a celebration of disorder and superficiality.

All the rights guaranteed by the Constitution were based on a vision of man as a responsible being—responsible to something within oneself that is higher than the all-too-human desires for personal gain and satisfaction; higher than the dictates of the purely theoretical or logical mind; higher than instinctive loyalties to family and tribe.

This higher reality within the self was called many things—reason, conscience, Nature’s God. When this idea is left out, or treated as though its meaning were obvious, then the ideals of independence and liberty lose their power and truth. They become mere names that mask the ever-present tendency of nations and groupings of people and individuals to seek only their own external and short-term advantages.

Great ideas, ideas that meaningfully reflect something of mankind’s ancient tradition of wisdom, have the power to bind people together, and to bring unity under a goal and vision that is stronger and deeper than all personal, short-term gain. This is the mark of great ideas: they unify people and they also act to *unify the disparate parts of the human being*; they speak of a social order that is possible *on the basis of an ordering within the individual self*. The idea of America once had something of this power of unification.

Why We Need Heroes

It is the same with the heroes we learned about as children—Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln. Once they stood as symbols incarnating the idea of America. They lived their lives amid the same forces and obstructions within which every human being must find his or her way through life. But as heroes, they also lived, acted in relation to something that transcends and transforms the human condition. Each had his weaknesses, his defeats, his doubts; but in each

of them another and greater force existed that expressed itself as the idea of America. In this, they were heroes in the ancient sense of the term: they were demi-gods.

The Idea of Man's Two Natures

In many ancient mythic traditions, the hero is a demi-god, a symbol of man as a two-natured being. In Greek mythology, he is usually the offspring of an immortal god and a mortal mother—as are Achilles, Perseus, Hercules and many others. This juxtaposition of the eternal and the finite, the divine and the human in the hero's make-up gives the ancient legends their particular drama, poignancy and mystery. And, it might be added, their haunting sense of reality. No one who hears these tales with an open heart can fail to sense that, although the stories in them are in a literal sense impossible, in a deeper sense they are portraying the world and life as they really are—they are portraying the laws and forces that actually govern man's life in the cosmos.

But it is difficult to hold these two opposing aspects of human nature together in one's mind; neither the logical mind nor the merely emotional mind can do it. The idea of man's two natures, which is such an essential aspect of the ancient wisdom, requires great artistry and many other related ideas and conditions of life for it to remain a vital force in a culture or in one's individual approach to life. The idea in its many forms often decays through mistaken over-emphasis on one or another of these two aspects of human nature. Either the hero begins to be regarded as purely superhuman and a god; or the transcendent aspect of the hero's nature is rejected and the all-too-human aspects emphasized. In the former case, the hero is regarded as an unattainable ideal with little or no relevance to our actual lives—as a kind of fantasy that promotes self-deception about our human weaknesses. In the latter case, through emphasizing only the human weaknesses of the hero, we lose the hope of transcendence and cynically, despairingly, reduce our vision of man to that of a socially conditioned animal.

Our heroes have gone from being regarded as non-human gods who can do no wrong to being seen as mere mortals whose great deeds are only the result of chance external forces and whose great words were often hypocritical or motivated by the desire for personal gain. At the very most, such “realism” grants our heroes brilliant minds, shrewdness, or the kind of morality that is often betrayed by their actions. We swing between naïve idealism and cynical “realism”. We have lost the ability to understand that a hero is the representation of an idea.

Myth and the Meaning of America

We need to rediscover the deeper, mythic meaning of our heroes and our nation—a mythic meaning not for children, but for adults. Adults need mythic symbols just as much—or even more—than children. We need ideas; but we need ideas expressed in ways that touch our feeling and not only our logical minds. It is one of the teachings of wisdom that the merely logical mind—when it is cut off from the intrinsically higher human feelings of wonder and the sense of the sacred—inevitably becomes a plaything of the external senses, convincing us that only what is perceived with these outward-directed senses is real. Ideas communicated through myth, on the other hand, show us a world that is perceived through the vision of wonder, love of truth and the sense of the sacred, the impulse to serve and to participate in a greater reality—what we may call the inner world.

Many of us may think of myth as something opposed to fact, as falsehood or superstition. But in the root meaning of the word, the great myths of mankind are representations of cosmic and spiritual ideas, expressed in a way that touches the deeper springs of the mind—the intelligence of the heart. This mythic world does not exclude the world of concrete, everyday reality, but includes it in a greater awareness of the paradox of human existence. Within this wider vision, when we see, for example, the flaws and compromises in the life and character of one of our heroes, these “facts” will be inseparably juxtaposed with his

immense courage or moral vision or self-sacrifice for the good of the nation. The mythic vision will not treat these contradictory aspects of his nature as merely a sign of hypocrisy or inner disorder. On the contrary, it will regard that contradiction as a reflection of the mystery of the two levels within our human nature—the divinity within man joined to the all-to-human. We need to reclaim these symbols before they are destroyed by narrow “realism” or naive “idealism”. We need to reclaim them in a way corresponds to what is necessary for us now in our own era.

They are there, these symbols, or archetypes, in our hearts and minds; Lincoln is there, Jefferson is there, Washington is there, the Constitutional Convention is there, and, as we shall see, many other people and events are also there. They live in our subconscious, and we need to let them come forward and act again upon us. As it is, they are now being covered over by a foolish realism that sees only “facts” of the outer world, but is blind to the laws of the inner world. Do we have so many symbols and sources of mythic power in our primal consciousness that we can afford to eviscerate these American meanings that are already there waiting to help us? *We need to re-mythologize the idea of America.*

The Web of Truth and the Two Histories of America

We are saying that the idea of America brought a special kind of hope to the world because it carried, to some extent, ideas rooted in an ancient, primordial wisdom. We are saying that the idea of America expressed enough of that wisdom to touch the hearts of men and women throughout the world who yearned not only for wealth or safety or comfort, but also for meaning and transcendence. We are saying that the idea of America needs to be recovered—and that it can be recovered by looking at our historical icons in the light of ancient wisdom. The aim is to build—or rebuild—a bridge between our out-of-control, ever-degrading American culture

and the source of hope and meaning that has always existed behind the scenes of what we call history.

We need to consider that there are two histories of the world and that, on its scale, there are also two histories of America. In the great sweep of world events over the centuries, what we call history is mainly, as one modern observer has termed it, “the history of crime.” We measure our epochs and periods by wars, convulsions, revolutions, assassinations and violent usurpations; mass executions, oppressions of peoples, invasions, murders and enslavements. The wars of the Mediterranean basin—wars between Greece, Persia, Sparta, for example—define our view of antiquity; the career of the megalomaniac Alexander the Great defines and names another whole period of history. And although we reckon time by a sacred reality, the birth of Christ or, as in the Hebraic tradition, the image of the sacred creation of the universe, everything that happens after the sacred beginning of historical time, everything we take as significant, is an event that exhibits one or another of the elements of human depravity or violence. Even such seemingly neutral historical designations as the “Industrial Revolution” or the “Enlightenment” or the “Scientific Revolution”, when we examine their meaning, translate into names for periods of accelerated external change in human affairs and imply little real reference to the moral or conscious development of man.

One might object that wars and revolutions produce such dramatic changes in the life of cultures that they must stand out as historical markers, much in the way that mountain ranges and great rivers mark the spatial borders of a nation or people. But the marking of history as we know it is more than a matter of convenience and gross, external determinations. Little or nothing in our history books communicates the horror and insanity of war, even so-called “noble” wars. Little or nothing helps us to feel the significance of the cunning and egoism, the callousness and self-deception of those individuals and events that are called “history makers.”

And even if the reporters of history try to present this aspect of human action, it is almost left behind and covered by all the other aspects of civilization that are presented as valuable—such as art or science or religion or social or economic improvements. To give only a paragraph or a chapter to a war in which thousands or even millions have been brutally murdered and then go on to discuss the social improvements brought about by the consequences of the event, would be, on an individual level, a little like treating the murder of one's parents, say, mainly as a biographical event that “ushered in” a new period of wealth or independence in one's life.

The Second History

But there is another history of the world, a second history, dealing with the efforts of more inwardly developed men and women to introduce truth and wisdom into the life of mankind. The proper meaning of the word “civilization” refers to these efforts and their results. We could speak of these undertakings as the introduction of great ideas into the world, but we must also keep in mind that such ideas come into the world not only in the form of philosophical teachings, but also in the form of religions, science, art—music, painting, sculpture, dance, architecture, myth and story. The great cathedrals of Europe are examples of such “insertions” into the life of the world, especially when taken in conjunction with certain other expressions of the wisdom teaching of Christianity—certain aspects of medieval music, for example, as well as the dynamic infusion of new theological meaning and hope brought by the deepened mythos of the figure of Mary.

Examples are countless of these “insertions”, although one must be careful of one's own subjective preferences in estimating their authenticity. One might cite, as further examples, the monuments of ancient Egypt, the Hebraic scriptures, the life and story of Christ, the philosophy and practice—also involving the science of music—brought by Pythagoras and his school, the life and example of Socrates—just to name a few of the most obvious. And, of course, if one

turned to the East, there would also be an overwhelming number of examples from what we are beginning to understand about the cultures of, India, Tibet, China...

No Idea Exists Alone

Looking at the past from this perspective—namely, from the perspective of the idea of the two histories—one soon comes upon a particular difficulty in discrimination. Just as no great idea exists alone, but is related to a network of ideas that provide a sense of hope or direction to human life, so are art forms and images and scriptures—and manners and customs—embedded in a network of ideas and orientations that altogether comprise their message and benefit to mankind. But what we see in history is that ideas and symbols are often broken off from the larger matrix of which they are a part. Such piecemeal ideas and symbols may then serve as influences toward degeneration and destruction. They become allied with highly subjective and divisive views and are taken over by the passions and ambitions of unregenerate man. We could even say that in such cases the energy of great ideas and symbols fuels the very tendencies of human life that they, in their authentic context, were meant to oppose. Although it is true that great ideas are one of the main forces that move the human race forward, often, in their broken or subjectivized form, they in fact intensify human violence and self-deception.

Murder and bloody war under the banner of Christian love; devastation under the banner of submission to Allah—such examples abound in human history. Ideas of honor, self-respect, duty to one's heritage and gods, the sacredness of the tribe or king—ideas that may originally have been part of the second history of mankind, influences inserted into the sweep of human life—when broken off from their context, have repeatedly sown despair instead of hope throughout the cycles of civilization. To be disillusioned with Christianity because of the Inquisition or the Crusades, or their less vivid counterparts in modern life, does not necessarily represent a judgment on the Christian teaching itself, but on how broken pieces of it have

combined and been used in the course of human history. This fate has befallen most of the great religions of the world.

The Metaphysical Function of Civilization

The second history of civilization is the record of the regenerative influences introduced into the life of man over the centuries and millennia and of their positive action on the quality of human life. More often than not, this positive action takes place in a quiet way and may not be entirely visible to our everyday perception. The action of great ideas or the artistic expressions of wisdom or authentic religious rituals and doctrines call people to an inner life or to a kind of communal relationship that does not and cannot call attention to itself in the same way as the coarser and often negative action of isolated ideas and symbols. This second kind of influence is extremely powerful, but also extremely subtle and, in the course of human history, fragile—in the sense that it is easily misused or misperceived. But whether outwardly perceived or not, this influence forms a kind of underground current that runs within or along with the great raging river of the history that we know. No civilization can long endure or justify itself unless it allows these two currents to exist—one that moves man outward toward the life of action and reaction in the outer world; and the second current that flows inward toward the endless source of consciousness and being.

To speak of two histories of America is to assert that this second current, this influence of great wisdom, has flowed through the life of this country from the very beginning. Alongside the tumultuous, twisting-and-turning, dangerous and phenomenally powerful river of the American history that we know, there has also flowed, forming quiet, backward-gliding eddies along the banks, the current of the ancient wisdom.

The Promise and the Crime of America

The real hope of America has always been that at the heart of its promises of liberty, equality and social opportunity there has sounded the call and the possibility of the search for the sacred within one's self—whatever name of whatever god or power of mind or consciousness has been chosen to designate that sacred reality.

But even the distant, but real, reflection of wisdom throws dazzling light on the disappointments, the mistakes, the failures and even the crimes of America, helping to free us from naïve expectations and equally naïve resentments concerning the first history of America or any other human enterprise on this earth. Wisdom teaches, and ordinary experience easily confirms, that the train of events in human history brings forward violence, injustice and the betrayal of truth—just as much as it may bring forth great external achievements. Wisdom teaches us to be neither foolishly discouraged by America's failings nor foolishly enthusiastic about its stated ideals, and the accidents of geography and natural resources that have contributed so much to its physical and economic strength over the past two centuries. In its outer life, its first history, America has murdered and cheated and broken its promises and betrayed its ideals in ways that are not so different from the first history of mankind as a whole. It is dangerously naïve to imagine that because the current of wisdom may flow through a country that country will, en masse, behave according to it. It is not so, just—so wisdom teaches us—as it is not so in the lives of individuals.

The teachings of wisdom prepare us for this fact, and fact it is, about the life of man: individually and collectively, we betray our ideals in our acts and actions; but at the same time, it is possible in the midst of this life of self-betrayal for a transforming force to enter and to lead men and women toward a new kind of life. But this possibility demands the working together of communities of individuals who are intensely devoted to the work of studying and

understanding the teachings of wisdom. And one of the forms of such communal life is what we call in this book “the second democracy”, the democracy that actually tries to live inwardly according to the ideals of self-determination, liberty of thought and conscience, respect for the selfhood of one’s neighbor—ideals whose expression in words are so familiar to us. The democracy we know speaks about these things and puts them into practice outwardly to a greater or lesser degree. But it is the second democracy that actually tries to understand these ideals in their fullest meaning and in so doing nourishes and sustains—invisibly, to be sure—the life of the democracy we know.

The Hope of America

The hope of America lies in the fact that it has made room for the search that characterizes the second history of man. The hope of the democracy we know is that it allows—and to a certain extent, calls us all toward—the life of conscience, of respect for our neighbor, that is rooted in the teachings of wisdom about the actual and potential selfhood of humanity.

This second democracy once existed in America, and we will speak about it in due course.

The hope of America lies not in its first history, but in the reality of its second history.

The hope of America lies and has consisted in the fact that its political ideals and forms of government, its iconic actions and archetypal heroes reflect in two directions at once—first, toward the external good of a life of liberty and equality and the reasonable search for a normal life of community and creative aspiration; and at the same time inwardly toward the search for inner development, the life of consciousness and reason that defines the nature of man and gives his life ultimate meaning. The hope of America lies in large measure in the extent to which its ideals and forms of action, and its main symbols of identity, point in two directions at once: to the outer and the inner simultaneously. But this capacity of an idea, a form, a heroic figure, to

point us in these two directions is the very meaning of the word myth. A mythic image, symbol or event contains at once just this unique power of inner and outer meaning, spiritual and material meaning. America needs to recover its mythic dimension. If not, if it begins to live only in its first history, only in the outer dimension, it will have lost all that really nourishes the life of a nation or an individual. It will be an outer empire alone, an empire only of money or military power or empty promises. And such an empty empire will soon die. And to the extent that the world still places its hope in America, the world may die with us.

The American Virtues and Their Shadows

To reanimate the idea of America will demand more than moral or patriotic fervor, more than believing or rejecting fixed concepts about democracy and liberty. It will demand a new effort of thought, an effort to sound new depths of the idea of America.

Each aspect of the idea of America and much of what we can recognize as noble or hopeful in the American character draws strength from a hidden connection to the teachings of wisdom that have guided mankind throughout the millennia. And many of the distortions of the American vision and the American character can be seen as perversions of this timeless vision of human nature and its possibilities. By way of concluding this introduction, we need to look once again and a little more closely at the startling contrast between a more profound meaning of some of America's ideals and what they are now becoming. The names, the words, have remained the same over the centuries, but the meanings are slipping away and, often enough, turning into their own opposites.

Liberty: Freedom of Conscience or Self-Gratification?

At the root of the American ideal of liberty is the right of every human being to search for and attend to the dictates of conscience. Political liberty means first and foremost the social conditions necessary to allow this search for one's own moral or spiritual light. But this ideal and right has been taken to mean merely the right to satisfy one's own subjective desires, whatever they may be, without any reference to the existence of the moral law within. In this way, the idea of liberty descends into the glorification of desire as such, which is an infantilization of its fundamental meaning.

Independence: Individuality or Individualism?

Historically and intrinsically, the American ideal of independence has a political meaning that echoes a deeply internal and metaphysical meaning. Self-determination as an inner ideal means the voluntary submission of the physical and socially conditioned aspects of man to the interior power of conscious selfhood. It is this interior conscious power that, paradoxically, represents both the uniqueness of every human being and his or her fundamental independence from socially conditioned personality. Paradoxically, authentic individuality means freedom from individualism. Or, to put it in language that more closely resembles the language of the ancient wisdom: The true *I am* is independent of the ego, the "tyrant" or "false monarch" of the ancient legends and myths. The idea of independence has, however, decayed into a purely external and political meaning with no reference to the inner justification and resonance of the idea. It now often means little more than an ideological affirmation of the sovereignty of egoistic idiosyncrasy. Authentic independence, however, on an individual and communal basis, means, among other things, the invitation to love and serve the common good under freely chosen obedience to a higher law.

Practicality : Honest Pragmatism or Blind Materialism?

One of the most hidden aspects of the ancient wisdom is the demand to verify for oneself all ideas about human life and the nature of the world, to shun blind faith no matter how exalted the pedigree of a teaching or a teacher. From the Buddha's legendary admonition to his pupils to be "lamps unto yourselves," to Socrates' insistence on the need to free oneself from the thrall of opinion, to Jesus' saying, "Know what is in thy sight and what is hidden will be revealed to thee,"^{xiv} there exists a powerful current of spiritual pragmatism in the ancient wisdom. Truth must be *experienced*, and not only believed in as dogma or inferred on logical or conceptual grounds. And through experience, actual inner facts and tangible results become the test of one's inner search. This aspect of the ancient wisdom operates as a weapon against one of man's chief weaknesses: the tendency of ordinary imagination to take the place of reality—the tendency to imagine that one loves, serves, knows, understands, when the facts are actually otherwise. At a certain point, in its American incarnation, this general direction of the ancient wisdom became identified with what was at first simply the healthy, mundane pragmatism that gave modern science so much of its external power, and that gave the main currents of American philosophy so much of their refreshing honesty and common sense. However, with the passage of time, the ideal of pragmatism has become a deeply entrenched prejudice against the very possibility of a real world behind the world we perceive through ordinary sense perception and logic. The need and the possibility of inner, non-sensory experience was forgotten and the demand for spiritual honesty has now degenerated. In the main corridors of science and academic thought, American honesty most often expresses itself as little more than materialistic cynicism.

The Rule of Law: Guardian or Usurper of Conscience?

In *Common Sense* Thomas Paine ringingly articulated America's fundamental attitude toward the law. Attacking the principle of *monarchy* (what we would now call totalitarianism), he

declares: “But where is the King of America? I’ll tell you, Friend, he reigns above and doth not make havock of mankind like the Brute of Britain.” Let the world know, he continues, “ that in America THE LAW IS KING.”

A profound idea is here at issue. In the ancient teachings the laws of nature and the moral law not only converge, but are one and the same. Ultimate reality and ultimate goodness blend into one. The human community is charged with the task of ordering its life according to the same kind of objective principles by which the cosmos itself is ordered. And these objective principles, which can unite people, rather than divide them, must be sought within the conscience of the community.

The Founding Fathers sought to create a structure of government that would protect and preserve the ongoing work of society to orient itself through the dictates of conscience. As Thomas Paine also recognized, there exists a fundamental distinction between the laws of government and the laws of society. Government is protective and essentially punitive; while society is creative and essentially beneficent. The American government was made for the purpose of protecting the American society. The former required negative laws and the ultimate support of physical force; the latter encouraged the intercourse of human souls in search of conscience. Government is the realm of legality; society is the realm of ethics. Law is the guardian of conscience.

How far we have come from this idea! The litigiousness of our culture is a clear sign that the legal is usurping the role of the ethical. Laws and statutes, no matter how carefully devised, can never take the place of individual ethical choice and action. The mechanisms of the law can never take the place of moral feeling. The fact that in our collective and individual life the legal system is being used to solve ethical problems is evidence that America’s original idea of the

supremacy of the law has been so degraded that the law is in danger of becoming no less of a tyrant than the old “Brute of Britain.”

The Nobility or the Slavery of Work?

From its very beginnings, America embraced the necessity of hard work not as an evil, but as an expression of self-respect and independence. Americans have always understood the obligation to “pay one’s way,” but in its origin this attitude toward life was inseparably connected to the sense that man was on earth to serve some purpose far greater than his own satisfaction or comfort, and even greater than what he ordinarily understood as love or charity. To be free and independent was to be worthy of a task placed upon man by God; all the functions and capacities of man—physical, mental and emotional—were to be engaged. It was understood that our life was not given to us for ourselves alone and that human beings would be granted a certain greatness only to the extent that they sought to be able to serve God and their neighbor. Man was born to live and work in the midst of the forces of life, to build and create and bring nature to perfection—but all as a service: that is, as part of a life that progressively frees itself from egoistic desires and illusions.

Reflecting the influence of this idea, Americans have traditionally—as part of the idea of America—spurned idleness and the craving for unearned goods. The self-respect of Americans has traditionally been linked to “payment”, not solely from egoism, but, on the contrary, as an aspect of humility and as a sign of communal interdependence. The community depends on each individual’s efforts, while at the same time each individual’s life is mystically supported by a certain grace pouring through the community. Activity without the recognition of grace was practically the definition of the sin of pride; but also: the recognition of the need for grace without a commitment to active work was no less a mark of pride, the egoism that overestimates

one's own importance in the scheme of things and that forgets that even God is engaged in a dramatic struggle in the midst of His creation.

That this general understanding of the meaning of work has been translated into the driven-ness and slavery of work characteristic of our present culture is one of the great ironies of our history. Most of our work in the short run or the long run often serves only the tangle of unnecessary desires and unstable standards of self-worth from which the ancient wisdom has always sought to free us precisely through hard work within ourselves and outside ourselves.

Freedom of Speech or Empty Talk?

At the deepest roots of the American ideal of free speech lies an understanding of what is necessary for the conscience of the community to be heard. Every individual must be free to express his or her mind and his or her personal sense of what is right and true. The aim is to foster the appearance within the community of the voice of justice and divine common sense. The approach to truth is a communal process; no single individual can find it alone or impose it on others. Thus, the ideal of free speech is inextricably linked to freedom of thought, and both freedom of thought and freedom of speech have their ultimate justification when serving the aim of opening to the inner and outer ideal of Truth, the great self within the individual and the higher intelligence and moral power of the community.

But what does free speech mean in our present culture? How much of what we prize as the right to free speech is based on a loneliness that makes us yearn for others to pay more attention to us? How to understand the decay of this ideal into the sanctification of superficial opinion, on the one hand, or commercial communication on the other? How to understand that we are losing the *knowledge function* of the community, that the hard work of thinking together is being eclipsed by the addiction to information and empty verbal or electronic "conversation"

and by our society's attachment to applications of knowledge that bring only egoistic and often illusory gain?

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The American Soul

The aim of this book is to look in a new way at the fundamental ideals and values that have shaped the American nation and which now are shaping the entire world. The task is to separate out the political, sociological and economic aspects of "America" that by themselves tend to set us against each other, and to rediscover in the American vision the transcendent ideas about man and the universe that can bring and keep people together, both as individuals and in collectivities, for the purpose of serving the good. It is this goal of bringing people together under the guidance of conscience that lies at the heart of the idea of democracy in its uniquely American form.

But the question that now needs to be asked concerns the interior, human meaning of this fundamental goal of democracy and the inner as well as the outer conditions that are necessary for its realization. Can there be any real and enduring relationship between disparate peoples and nations unless there also takes place within the soul of the individual human being a similar movement of relationship between the disparate parts of oneself? Can there be an American nation or, so to say, an American world, unless there also exists within oneself a unified *American soul*? And if there is a failure of the American vision, with all that this implies for the safety and survival of our world, might it not be because we have failed to understand the metaphysical and psychological requirements of the ideals that have shaped our nation? This is what it means to think in a new way about America.

History shows us many examples of teachings and visions that began as a unifying force, but which eventually set people against each other. Wars of religion are only the most obvious examples. Almost without exception, the great reformers within every spiritual tradition have sought to restore its original vision by re-establishing the internal, psychological meaning of the ideals and symbols that define the teaching. The great mystical existentialists of the Christian tradition, for example, such as the desert Fathers in the early centuries of our era, or Meister Eckhart and the men and women he influenced in medieval Europe, show how the commandment of love is meant also to be experienced within oneself: as the interior penetration by a forgiving, reconciling energy, and that until our individual inner disharmony is healed by this energy there can be no harmony, no enduring love, in relation to one's neighbor. The great visionaries of the Judaic tradition, for their part, show that a man or woman cannot truly trust in the God of the universe, the creator of the material and the moral world, until he or she can begin to trust in the divine self within one's own body and mind. Likewise, the Sufis, the mystics of Islam, the religion of submission to Allah, speak always of the fundamental need for the ego to submit to a godlike power of love and intelligence within oneself.

Similar examples could be found in all the great wisdom traditions of the world, Eastern and Western, including of course the teachings of Africa and the American Indian. And we find the same note sounded by masters and teachers who are not associated with what we usually think of as "religion." Socrates, in Plato's *Republic*, speaks as clearly and forcefully as any mystic of the primary and fundamental need for man to understand reality and the moral law by working first for interior, personal harmony of mind, desire and will.^v

When any great metaphysical or moral teaching becomes interpreted in a purely external way and applied solely in the political, sociological or economic sphere, it can only result in "the same old story," the setting of men and women against each other. When the followers of

Christianity or Judaism or Islam lose the internal meaning of their teachings, when it is forgotten that the world is what it is because human beings are what they are, and that nothing essential in human life can be changed for the better without first attending to man's inner disharmony, then, inevitably, there arises the dominance of "politics," leading to violence and war in all its many forms.

The purpose of this book is to call for the return of the inner meaning of America to our hearts and minds. Of course, when we speak of the ideals of America we are not speaking of a whole spiritual tradition, such as Christianity or Judaism, nor are we even speaking of a great, systematic philosophy, such as that of Plato. The "American philosophy" in this sense is not an intact revealed teaching which one might wish to see restored or adapted as a guide to the inner life. Nothing could be more misleading or, in its way, dangerous than to equate the American ideals with teachings that, on the whole, have come to mankind from a higher level of mind.

Yet, the American philosophy contains fragments, very precious fragments, of ideals and visions that most certainly do have their origin and root meaning in what Aldous Huxley termed "the perennial philosophy," the teaching about man and the universe that lies at the heart of all the authentic spiritual traditions of the world. These fragments, which comprise the basis of the American philosophy, are infinitely precious because they are all that many of us have to show us the direction back toward the real meaning of human life in this bewildering modern world. By opening ourselves to the internal meaning of these fragments, we have a chance to start the journey toward wholeness in ourselves and toward the real feeling for our neighbor that is the only sure support and purpose of what could rightly be called democracy. For all we know, this may be our last chance to move toward a world-view that can orient mankind toward the real world, rather than the illusory world, with all its attendant violence and meaninglessness, in which most of us now live.

And now, let us begin to look in a new way at our world, our selves, our America.

ⁱ See esp. Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

ⁱⁱ Epictetus, *The Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. by P.E. Matheson, Book II, Ch. V. (brackets mine). In Whitney Oates, ed., *The Stoic and Epicurean Philosophers* (New York: The Modern Library, 1940), p.288.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, V, 10, trans. by Pierre Hadot in Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.130.

^{iv} *The Gospel of Thomas. Logion #5*

^v *Republic*, 443.