

CONCLUSION: THE AMERICA OF OUR HOPES

Chapter 11: The Guardian at the Door

“You don’t know what you have here.”

Whenever I think of that summer night a quarter of a century ago, I ask myself why those challenging words so lifted my spirits and renewed my hope in America. Did I imagine that the American people would somehow, someday lift themselves *en masse* above our ordinary level of human confusion and discover a shared sense of purpose? Did I hope that a new sense of community would appear from some great source higher than self-interest, fear and resentment? Did I really hope for such a thing?

Certainly not. America is not a monastery or spiritual brotherhood, not an Ephrata or anything remotely like it. America is what the ancient wisdom called “the world” in the form of a vast nation, “the world” with all its noise and violence, its ideals betrayed at every turn, seducing itself by noble words it can neither understand nor obey, and which only mask its actual fragmentation and deadly momentum. In the room called “the world” men have always spoken passionately of justice and the common good right before and after—and even while in the act of—cutting a throat or stealing a purse or salting a wound.

What America Is and What America Means

And yet, America still means hope. Within the “world” that is America as it actually is, there waits another America, another world. Within, behind what America *is* there lies what America *means*. We are naïve only when we confuse the two, when our feeling of hope is directed toward

the outer America that we perceive with the senses, rather than the America we grasp with the mind and the heart. Because this other America seems powerless or elusive does not mean it is not real. Because America betrays its ideals is no reason to reject the ideals themselves. We do not live in correspondence with the great life hidden within us; but that is no reason to deny that this hidden life exists and calls to us.

An American Place

America—the physical, actual America that we see and live in—this America needs to be understood not as in itself sacred, but as a privileged, temporary corner of “the world,” where men and women are granted the liberty to search for truth and the life within. Behind all the political and economic machinations of the Founders of this country, there existed in their minds and hearts the passion to create “an American place” in the midst of the world, where the Good can be sought and lived. They believed there existed the Good—some called it God, others called it Reason—and that the Good could enter human life. Of course, political freedom exists now in many countries of the world, often due to the influence of American ideas, but we will never ‘know what we have here’ if we do not understand that the founding basis of this country was not land or tribe, but the call for people to assemble together and work together for the Good. Perhaps America’s people no longer come together for this purpose; perhaps political liberty and the great rule of law serve now only to protect the cravings for meaningless comfort and meaningless power; perhaps the nation’s physical strength seduces us into imagining that physical strength is true strength; that physical safety is true safety, that external freedom is true freedom, external democracy the true equality of people. If so, if we believe that the outer America is the real America, we are deceived by ourselves and, as the prophets of Israel warned, we are certain to perish-- first inwardly and then outwardly.

The laws of America, the political structure of American government, the respect for the Constitution, the rituals and symbols of the American republic—all of this external America bears traces, some brilliant and others faint and shadowy, but traces of a great vision of truth and wisdom that has nourished the soul of mankind throughout history.

We need to find our way back to the other America, the inner America, which is to say that the modern world itself needs to find its way back to the fundamental reality of the inner world, what the ancients called “the world of the soul.” Set aside the usual associations with the word “soul”—associations which for many of us have made of it something superstitious or something dull and ordinary. Set aside the religious and philosophical clichés surrounding the word and recognize that what it refers to is a deep, hidden power of consciousness and moral power within every human being, a force, an intensity of feeling and knowing that lies at the essence of our nature, that defines us as human beings, that defines our place in nature, on earth and with each other.

The teachings of wisdom bring to us the idea that it is through this inner power of intelligence and conscience that the Good can enter the world of man and, through mankind, the world of the earth. Wisdom teaches that the world has become what it has become, human life has become what it has become because man has lost contact with this consciousness and power of understanding within himself. What is sometimes called God, so the teachings tell us, acts in the world to help the world—yes, but not as some fairy-tale father-figure with a white beard moving the chess pieces of history, but through the authentic consciousness of man. It is that consciousness—mortally asleep in us though it be—through which the helping powers operate. Through us, and into the earth, and from the earth back to the Source as man’s genuine help for the Creator. The Founders of America were passionately oriented to teachings that in some distinct and significant measure reflected these ideas.

The Guardian at the Door

Man's life is what it is because man is what he is. *The American plan of government was based on that truth.* Man is corrupt and needs a specific kind of government in order to restrain his corruption—yes. But man also has within him Reason (or God) and needs a specific form of government in order to allow the kind of seeking that can open the individual and his or her community to the experience and the action of that Reason, that God, that Good.

The inspired form of the Constitution and the institutions of the American government may sometimes tempt us to imagine that the Founders believed, or should have believed, that it is external laws and principles of legal process that can improve human life and keep it safe. Nothing could be further from the truth. They understood, implicitly through the philosophy or religion they clung to, and many times surely explicitly, that it is through the perfection of the self that human life on earth can become what it is meant to become. Government was there to protect *that* process, to allow *that* process; government was there to stand guard at the door to the room where men actually seek, rather than just speak of, truth, justice and the common good.

The American Illusion

Because of the material prosperity of our country and because it seemed, and actually was, after the fact, so intimately connected with market capitalism and its successes, the illusion was embraced that man's life can be morally and materially perfected mainly through external changes involving, among other things, external forms of government and social order. This illusion was our illusion and some time ago it became the whole world's illusion.

It was this illusion that fueled the successes of Marxist communism and which ultimately brought it down, just as all illusions, sooner rather than later, come to nothing. Communism placed its entire emphasis on improving the external lot of mankind. It placed its faith in external

change, on re-distributing wealth and the means of production, on correcting hierarchical inequities. It is not that such aims were wrong; it is only that in the absence of attending to the inner world of man, such aims could only perpetuate the crimes of society under new and newly deceptive names. Give all of mankind an equal share of material goods today and tomorrow there will exist the old inequities. Why? Obviously, because injustice emanates from man, not from circumstances; or, to be more precise, circumstances and the laws that support them emanate from the mind and heart of man. When the mind and heart are undeveloped or corrupt, no laws or economic system, however wisely conceived, can bring about the Good.

But do we not suffer from the same kind of illusion? What do “free markets” have to do with real human freedom unless they provide for the material needs of a people seeking the inner freedom that is the essence of the developing human soul? Without this inner aim, economics turns us into consumers, rather than creators.

What does political liberty have to do with personal liberty if it means only the right to satisfy one’s own subjective desires, whatever they may be, without real reference to the moral law within? At the root of the American ideal of liberty is the right of every individual to search for and attend to the dictates of conscience. The individual is free, within reason, to make his external life support that search; he is free to seek wealth and property and climb to his or her vocation, and create his family and even, if it so happens, a dynasty of sorts. It is all right, all of it; but it is not and cannot be the aim of life. Without the development of the soul, it is an illusion and, as such, it will, as the psalm says, simply “come to nothing.”²¹

What is Character?

The life of society, family, work and status, the respect from others that we all need, the love from others that we need, the simple, obvious duties toward loved ones and our neighbor that we all yearn to fulfill—all of this takes its real power and meaning as expressions of and

supports to the development of the soul—or, to place this specific meaning on the word: the development of *character*. The American Revolution itself, if we may make this proposition, can symbolize the inner revolution by which the individual soul, perfected--the authentic character of man, developing and developed--rightfully takes its place as the inner sovereign, displacing the false king, “the brute of Britain,” and all the false kings of myth and legend. “We think our civilization near its meridian,” writes our greatest philosopher, Ralph Waldo Emerson, “but we are yet only at the cock-crowing and morning star, In our barbarous society the influence of character is in its infancy. As a political power, as the rightful lord who is to tumble all rulers from their chairs, its presence is hardly yet suspected.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Consider, further, the American ideal of independence. Historically and intrinsically, the outer, political meaning of this ideal echoes a deeply internal and metaphysical meaning. Self-determination as an inner ideal means the voluntary submission of the physically and socially conditioned aspects of man to the interior power of conscious selfhood. It is in this interior power that there resides both the uniqueness of every human being and his or her fundamental independence from socially conditioned personality. Paradoxically, then, authentic individuality means freedom from “individualism”. To put it in language that more closely resembles the language of the perennial teachings: the true *I Am* is independent of the small self, the ego.

If we think carefully about this distinction between the authentic self and the socially conditioned self, we can see into the deeper meaning of the word *character*. A man or woman has character to the extent that the socially conditioned self, or personality, is obedient to the vision and moral feeling(conscience) of the authentic self. A man or woman of character is not a ghost of a human being; he or she is both a flesh and blood individual and an instrument of impersonal greatness; both a personality and a soul. But for this to be, the soul must occupy its place within, and this does not happen by itself, automatically. It requires the help and the

struggle that the great wisdom teachings speak of and which, behind the scenes of what we call history, they offer—if only in the form of ideas that serve as pointers leading toward the great search for truth.

Beyond Personal Freedom

But what, in fact, has become of this idea of man's fundamental independence? In its purely external and political meaning, it now often signifies little more than an ideological affirmation of personal idiosyncrasy. We need to re-discover the meaning of the American idea of independence as an invitation to the individual and community of man to love and serve the common good under freely chosen obedience to a higher law.

“The tendencies of the times,” writes Emerson, “favor the idea of self-government, and leave the individual...to the rewards and penalties of his own constitution...The movement in this direction has been very marked in modern history. Much has been blind and discredited, but the nature of the revolution is not affected by the vices of the revolters; for this is purely a moral force...”

But, Emerson continues, speaking of the “invisibility” and powerlessness of this ideal: “It was never adopted by any *party* in history, *neither can be.*” Is he perhaps telling us that the American ideal of independence and the right and power of the individual to search for conscience in his life and actions, cannot be embodied in government, that it can only be *protected* by government. “This ideal,” he says, “separates the individual from all party, and unites him at the same time, to the (human) race.” It is our personal freedom, yet at the same time “it promises a recognition of higher rights than personal freedom, or security of property.”

Higher rights than personal freedom? What could that mean? “A man,” says Emerson, “has a right to be employed, to be trusted, to be loved, to be revered. The power of love, as the basis of a state, has never been tried.” What is he talking about? Does he actually imagine that

love could be the basis of a nation existing in what we called “the world” with all its fear and violence? Or is Emerson to be understood quite differently—as offering the vision of a transformed State within a State, an America within America? Is that how we must interpret the following words, astonishing either in their idealism or in their prophetic vision of what the outer America with all its physical power, its wise laws and its triumphant/tragic heroic/crime-ridden story is meant to protect and foreshadow:

“We must not imagine that all things are lapsing into confusion, if every tender protestant be not compelled to bear his part in certain social conventions; nor doubt that roads can be built, letters carried, and the fruits of labor secured, when the government of force is at an end...Could not a nation of friends even devise better ways? On the other hand, let not the most conservative and timid fear anything from a premature surrender of the bayonet and system of force.”

Again, what is Emerson imagining? Is he taking us away from the world as it actually is, the real “world” of human passions and violence? Or is he opening the doors of our perception to a possible world within the world—the America of our hopes—within the flawed, but littered-with-divine markings and not-yet-ashen ideals that at this moment in history comprise the America that we know, but of which we can rightfully say, “We don’t know what we have here.”

Emerson is no foolish optimist: “For,” he continues, “according to the law of nature, which is quite superior to our will, it stands thus: there will always be a government of force, where men are selfish...” But, “...when they are pure enough to abjure the code of force, they will be wise enough to see how these public ends of the post-office, of the highway, of commerce, and the exchange of property, of museums and libraries, of institutions, of art and

science, can be answered.” But for now, he says, “we live in a very low state of the world, and pay unwilling tribute to governments founded on force...”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Secret of America: Time and the Future

Emerson sees the American future as a culture founded on love. But even in such an extravagant idea, maybe especially in it, he is no foolish optimist. He knows what the world is really like. We are therefore obliged to listen to him as we are obliged to listen to every great prophet in history. When a true prophet speaks of the future, he is not descending to mere predictions of events. We are obliged to hear Emerson and to attend to America—that is to say, to the future of the earth—as *that which is possible*, never as that which is inevitable. To the prophetic mind and in the prophetic voice, the idea of the future is the idea of what can be and what will be—*depending always on the state of man’s being*.

Here lies the secret of America—that it still has the future, that it offers mankind a future. The remnants of other nations and cultures may strike the sense of wonder in us with the greatness of their art and beauty and customs. But in these places we are looking into the past. In America, we are looking into the future—maybe an increasingly threatening future, but still a real one. America’s spaces still exist, its vast stretches of nature—mountains, deserts, forests. America is still raw, still unplumbed, undeveloped. Spatially and temporally, America is still unfinished—as man, the unfinished animal, is still and ever not yet what he can become.

It is what man is now and what he can become that is the real, inner meaning of time and the future as the prophet understands these words. If we take America “literally”, if we see around us conformity, corruption, rank injustice, materialism, superficiality and vulgarity, metaphysical squalor and blind attachment to physical comfort—if we see only that, we see the death of America and the end of its future. But if we look more deeply, we may still see a nation

and a people granted for a brief moment the material and spiritual conditions enabling them to step into the real future of man, that is the future of the developing soul.

The future is another word for the soul. And the only hope for man is in the growth of the soul: such, uncompromisingly and without any possibility of bargaining, is the message of the teachings of wisdom, those very teachings whose reflection, however faint, gave original light to the ideals of the American nation.

We still have the future. America has the future in its grasp, though that grasp is weakening. Other nations and peoples have the past—and, flowing through the past to this continent, our continent, a new world was born: in pain, in sorrow, in greed, in corruption, in injustice, in the enslavement and murder of masses—but it was born; and nowhere on earth have worlds been born independently of the crimes of man—except for the inner worlds, the second history of the earth that flows within and amid the violent, confused first history of the earth. America was born and with it, the flame of the future—the flame of hope—was transmitted.

But without a specific effort on the part of man, without will and struggle, our future will disappear, hope will disappear—real, objective hope will disappear from our world.

Toward Objective Hope

But, what *is* hope when we stand in front of the anguish of our time, the afflictions visited upon us by our successes, by the very things in which we passively placed our hope: mental knowledge, technology, laws, the flag, short-term conquests in the sciences drawing in their train long-term terrors; the abandonment of traditional customs for the sake of comfort, pleasure and superficial “liberty”; the heavy influences we allow into the minds and bodies of our children—influences of violent imagery, egoism, drugs and sham ideals of fame and sexual titillation, all of which, combined with the lethal absence of metaphysical confidence in the adult

world, poisons the seeds of innocent wonder-- which is the root of all that is truly intellectual and moral in man, in that it is the germ of character, the germ of the developing soul, the first threads that connect man to what is higher in himself and in the universe.

We have placed our hope in *things* and it is especially poignant to consider how many of us, and how many in the world, have placed their hope in external America—in its military power, its laws, its constitution, its ideals. Such hope is purely passive in that it expects something outside of the inner world of man to bring to the world safety, love, honor and, above all, meaning. Passive hope is only a dream, not a force, certainly not a force for the good.

Our first and last question is this: Can America, with its great armies protecting itself and the world, with its constitution lighting the way to empowering the peoples of the world—can America become both stronger and weaker than it now is? Weaker in the sense of allowing itself and the world to remember what it stands for—namely, the vision that requires of the individual submission to a higher, invisible reality; stronger in that it begins to remember what it was created to protect and shelter—the process by which men and women seek to tend the soul.

Why Have We Become So Strong?

Can America remember that it exists in the world and-- in some way we do not understand—may even have been *allowed* to become so strong, in order to protect that upon which all the great civilizations of history have been based? America means the melting pot, yes, but not only of races and people, but of the wisdom upon which all races and peoples have sought to live. As the instrument of the unstoppable processes of modernity which are destroying the forms of traditional cultures, can America realize that it must assume the great task of helping to bring to the earth that which the great civilizations of the world once brought to the earth: namely, the teachings of wisdom and the path that wisdom offers its children that leads to the soul's birth within the earth's body.

America must give back to the world the main thing it is taking from the world. If America does not remember itself as the guardian of the process by which the soul of man can grow and act upon the earth, then America will surely be destroyed, not necessarily through war, but slowly and from within like a hollowed-out tree standing tall in the desert of petrified life.

If America remembers its meaning, even if only a little—even to the extent that it continues to shelter a search that its rulers may no longer understand or acknowledge—its leaders, that is, of government, business, science and education—then, as the nations and cultures of the world lose their own wisdom and ways to the soul to the trump of modernity and advancing technology, then these nations and cultures will be touched once more by America; even the ones who fear America and wish to resist it will be touched. There may appear throughout the world the strange sense that something weak and fragile and exceedingly important is possible within America. If America, outer America—that is, the forces of modernity—are taking away religious practices and customs that each culture and nation may hold dear, if the world of other, older cultures sees its children casting away its old values and turning instead to the materialism that America (that is, modernity) is projecting into the world, these other cultures may feel, subliminally even, that another process is being sheltered by America, a process of the inner search for the soul, and that it is this process that can bring again or preserve the real meaning of their own ancient and threatened spiritual ways. It will be the same thing outwardly; the ancient customs, language, symbols may be doomed, but they were and are only the outer manifestation of the energy of the soul that the creators of tradition embodied. Who knows what carriers of truth and wisdom are waiting to work behind the scenes of the outer history of the world?—to bring to the world a continuation or renewal of its inner history, the history that brings to the earth what is truly the Good for nature and for humanity?

Is America Necessary?

Will there appear communities of men and women carrying the eternal life of the soul, seeking it in the ever new world, the ever changing outer world? That question lies at the heart of the future of the earth. It is the question we can put to America—the symbolic America which now exists not only on the North American continent, but in the cities of Europe, the houses and mountains of Latin America, the vast populaces of Russia, India, China and even in the dangerous air of Jerusalem—cities and nations which incline their ear and eye now toward the thing called democracy, strange to their ancient ways, menacing to their ancient customs, but yet the only political form that can allow the world of today to exist tomorrow.

The world will see that it needs this entire America, America with its soul. It does not need and will absorb, resist, imitate and dissolve an empty America. A metaphysically empty America cannot endure, it will not survive; it may keep its name and armies for a while, it may keep its constitution and its laws and forms of government, it may keep its symbolic heroes, it may remain a place where people wish to survive physically and economically; but, without the inner resonance of its ideals and values, without the olive branch in its eagle claws—that is, without the primacy of the goal of peace, the peace like that of the American Indian, the peace that passes understanding—without its American soul, America is sure to go nowhere, and, if so, where will humanity go?

It is not that America is superior to the rest of the world. It is only that its newness and vitality led it to be the conduit for the forces of modernity that are now transmuting the civilization of the world. Perhaps we may even speculate that these forces needed an America, some nation or people through which they could act in the world. In this, America could very well be understood as the bringer of evil to mankind; but like Hiawatha or even Atotarho, this same America was also the fountain of hope for the world, hope that resided in its inner ideals,

its remarkable men and women, its colossal crimes that mirrored anew the horror of the sleep of the human soul, a horror whose power to shock had been dulled in the old, now-without-hope old worlds across the ocean. The reactions against America are, among other things, often the shock of the realization that even this land of hope could also be the carrier of such barbarism and injustice. But the disappointed hope in the outer America needs to be refined into hope in the developing soul. The world hoped in the outer America while subliminally feeling the resonance of the inner America. It must now be invited to begin to feel again the inner America. But first we who live here must feel it. If Americans themselves do not acknowledge the soul of America, the world may not wish to keep us.

And the world needs to keep us. The world needs to help America. It sounds strange, but America needs the good will of the world for its survival and for its role of sheltering the process of the inner search. This inner search can, of course, and will take place in other parts of the world—perhaps even better and more deeply than in the United States. But the preservation of a world order in which that search can take place depends for now on the success of America. Outer America has made the world safe for commerce; but in doing so, it must make the world safe for the inner America and the search for truth. It is called to sacralize this present world by keeping alive the external conditions and by protecting the inner attitudes that comprise the habitat of the growing human soul.

Chapter 12: Toward a Community of Conscience

We have been asking for a vision of America that can help us see more clearly what we actually are and what we can work to become. And we are saying that this is the same kind of vision that we need in relation to ourselves as individuals struggling for self knowledge and moral power. Like America itself, we need to discover how to look impartially at both the inner greatness that calls to us and the profound weaknesses that in fact determine the life we actually live—with all its self-deception, arrogance and betrayal.

With this personal aim in mind, the story of America—its heroes and triumphs as well as its crimes—takes on a new meaning and serves a purpose appropriate to our era: the search for the knowledge of how to become genuine men and women, through the nourishment of the soul. We seek neither to revile nor to romanticize the actions and actors of America's past. But the cultural hero of the present age is the *Seeker*, no longer—as it was in other times and in other cultures—the Warrior or the Savior or the Adventurer or the Lover or the Wise Man. All these mythic icons of the past take on new meaning by representing qualities needed in a search whose purity and intensity by itself becomes the transforming force that nourishes the soul. The American story becomes a mythic story of what is needed in order for us to pursue that search and of all that resists it, against which we must struggle.

Our Heroes and Ourselves

Our heroes will remain heroes, but now more clearly heroes of both the inner world and the outer world of history. Or, shall we say, they will be permitted to remain heroes of the outer world of history only to the extent that we can see them as representing qualities needed in the inner world. And our attitude toward them will reflect our attitude toward ourselves. If we are bent merely on tearing down the old heroes and the old stories, emphasizing only the human weaknesses in our common past, we will be obliged to ask ourselves if we are denying our own possibilities as well; or, what is perhaps even more insidious, if we are implying that we are better than a Jefferson or a Franklin or a Washington, that we do not have in ourselves the same kind and degree of frailty, and even far more of it, than we believe we see in them and which we feel driven to decry and condemn. Or, at the other extreme, if we merely idolize them, and therefore put them out of reach, as religion often puts its saints or saviors out of reach, are we not equally denying our own higher possibilities? Perhaps our heroes were giants, but perhaps we are giants as well—somewhere in the future along the path of the developing soul.

We need to remember that what was called the unforgivable sin is the denial of man's possible greatness, his kinship with the highest element in the universe—God, reason, love, call it what we will. To deny our possibilities is to deny the fundamental obligations and duties put before man in accordance with his structure and nature as an image of God: namely, to care for the inner divinity and through that to care for our neighbor. The first Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me," is surely not only a commandment respecting a purely external greatness, but a commandment to attend to and care for the growing life of that greatness within ourselves; and "Love thy neighbor as thyself" surely does not mean that as we are, with all in us of fear and hate, we can transmit the divine power of love to our fellow man.

One glance at the outer history of America as well as at the events of almost any given day in our own lives, will show us that this cannot be what is meant by the commandment of love.

The commandment of worship and the commandment of love—the first commandment of Judaism and the defining commandment of Christianity—fuse together and illuminate the truth that the modern world, our present life, is now obliged to see as central: we are not what we are called to be; and we cannot become what we are meant to be simply by philosophizing about it and wishing for it, and surely not by pretending we are already fully man or fully woman.

We are asking to bring our own heroes and stories into the modern world—a world that no longer knows how to listen to the teachings of the great spiritual traditions and religions, and no longer knows how to care for our fellow man and treat each other as brothers and sisters; a world where the moral, religious and metaphysical truths of the past can no longer be received in the form in which they were once presented.

We are inviting, yearning for, our heroes and stories to support us in this new world, this desert which we are obliged to cross. We are seekers, not knowers; we are searching for *how* to know, *how* to have faith, *how* to love, how, even, to hate—but to hate what is truly evil, not simply what we fear or do not like; and to hate in a way that does not destroy half of reality, but which preserves and maintains, while destroying only that which obstructs the wholeness of life. We are seeking, and above all we need to know how to search, how to inquire, and we need to ask our heroes to help us understand what may also be named our fundamental, practical question: what are the qualities and virtues of the seeker; who are the gods of the search for truth?

Into the space created by this fundamental, practical question there step our heroes, the few we have mentioned and so many others—Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Chief

Seattle, Crazy Horse, to name just a few—waiting to take voice in our lives. Who are the American heroes of the search, and what do they represent?

Here is George Washington stepping back from power in order to allow the nation he has delivered to live according to its ideals. On the way to self knowledge, what kind of stepping back, yielding, is needed? Is there a movement within oneself where it is necessary and possible privately, and without hidden psychological agendas, to let go of an important thought or a strong reaction in order simply to see what is and to be what I am? Is there a completely different order of motivation within man that can be discovered only through the inward—invisible from the outside—sacrifice of what we are conditioned to imagine as power or safety or intelligence or love? And in the space created by that inner sacrifice what actual qualities of power, understanding and love can be given us?

For example, as the Civil War progressed, more and more were those who came in touch with Lincoln, astonished by his absence of malice toward the Confederacy and its leaders. Slowly, deliberately, Lincoln directed the war toward victory with a patience and will that became visible only over time, when, in the words of one observer, “those who had sought cunningly to lead him slowly found that he was leading them.”^{iv}

No man ever sought victory with greater intensity and single-mindedness. But what kind of victory?—for whom? Or for what? Here, as at so many junctures, the legendary Lincoln meets us as a symbol of a completely different order of feeling, unmixed with any sense of ordinary personal gain, that is possible for man, a feeling that one must “earn”—not necessarily as Lincoln earned it through the horror of war and the unimaginable burden of the vast numbers of dead and maimed, and of families and lands destroyed. But what does it evoke in us—we who may wish to become real—when, to take only one of countless examples, we hear of Lincoln visiting the sick and wounded soldiers in Virginia during the final days of the war. In front of

one of the great tents, as Carl Sandburg reports it, Lincoln was warned by a young army doctor, “Mr. President, you do not want to go in there... they are sick rebel prisoners.” “That is just where I want to go,” said Lincoln, and he strode in and shook hands from cot to cot.

Shot-torn in both hips, lay Colonel Harry L. Benbow, who had commanded three regiments at Five Forks. And according to Colonel Benbow: “He halted beside my bed and held out his hand. I was lying on my back, my hands folded across my breast. Looking at him in the face, ‘Mr. President,’ I said, ‘do you know to whom you offer your hand?’ ‘I do not,’ he replied. ‘Well,’ said I, ‘you offer it to a Confederate colonel who has fought you as hard as he could for four years.’ ‘Well,’ said he, ‘I hope a Confederate colonel will not refuse me his hand.’ ‘No, sir,’ I replied, ‘I will not,’ and I clasped his hand in both of mine.”

This is the action of a man who, by all accounts, had ascended to the power of the presidency through an ambition not yet permeated by anything like love or humility; a man of considerable natural presence who was yet as cunning as any politician, as able to manipulate others, to persuade, to feint and dodge, to rise up in anger, to be crushed by anxiety, sorrow and disappointment, to be hurt, annoyed, to be filled with regret and remorse, and yet to act more and more from a power of love and service to his nation, the people, his bedeviled wife—more and more from a wholly different quality of feeling, like a Peter Miller in front of Washington and in the manner of Washington’s response to Miller seeking the life of the traitorous Michael Widman. The point is: these stories of American heroes meet us as something possible for us *not as we are, but as can strive to become*. Lincoln is neither an unattainable saint nor a disguised self-seeking politician. He is a symbol—for the developing soul—of what to struggle *against* and what to struggle *for* in our own process of development. Neither saint nor sinner, but a symbol of the search, as are all the great warriors of myth, legend and scripture through the ages—the Islamic Ali urging the greater Holy War of self-overcoming; Arjuna of the *Bhagavad-Gita*

confronting the inner enemies “on the battlefield of life;” Gilgamesh and monster Humbaba, the Arthurian knights of the Round Table—and on and on. Could Lincoln ever have so deeply willed the union of the States—in that sense saving America as a nation—without showing in himself the qualities of interior, personal unity? The ancient cultural symbols of the warrior and the statesman become redefined as aspects of the inner quest, representing that capacity in ourselves that can identify the disparate and warring parts of our own nature and, under the embrace of conscious mercy and conscious rigor, allow these parts to find their places within a greater inner unity of the self. “Out of many, one” (*e pluribus unum*) may no longer be taken solely as an external, political motto.

And as for Jefferson, recently the most beleaguered of our heroes because of his owning slaves and his apparent intimacy with one of them, it would be wise to consider to whom we are indebted for the very ethical ideals and standards by which many of us now judge him. *In large measure, we owe the formulation of these ideals to Jefferson himself.*

We need to consider how many of the great ethical and spiritual reformers of the world found their conscience when caught by and within the very milieu which they themselves rose up to challenge. The force of true moral vision always arises from the depths of conscience—the real conscience, not the socially conditioned super-ego that reflects mainly the moralisms of the society and compels behavior largely through fear and guilt. The real conscience almost always arises in the pain of its own vision of our moral betrayals. Only through seeing the crime in oneself does the power of conscience and moral reason actually take fire and become a force that can move mankind. The message of Christianity is nothing if it is not that it is through suffering one’s own failure to love that the heart and mind are opened to a higher spirit. In the East the symbol of the heart and mind’s awakening is the lotus flower flourishing in the dark, muddy waters. If we were to take moral contradiction as the standard of condemning a man,

then there would exist none that are wise, none that are good, including all the saints and sages of every culture and tradition of the world.

It is not simply by behavior—our own or others’—that we must judge, if we judge at all; it is by how we face our own inner and outer manifestations; how clearly we see them, how truly we feel them, and how and to what extent we can express to ourselves and to our neighbor the ideal that defines our aim as man; and how intelligently and prudently we can help to create or at least obey conditions of life and thought that help the community of man to struggle with our human weaknesses and more nearly approach the life of the developing human soul.

Jefferson’s political philosophy represents, among other things, the ideal of democracy as the communal self. His vision can represent for us a reflection for our time of the ancient teaching that no human being can come to the purity of the truth by his or her own unaided effort. No one can think truly, no one can come to the purity of conscience, no one can come to the capacity to break away from intellectual fear, moral cowardice or blind submission to desire, without the help of others in one form or another.

Toward a Community of Conscience

The search for truth, as well as the possibility of living in a society that provides the freedom and welfare necessary to live the life of ordinary men and women—this whole world of human life comprising both the material and the spiritual needs of man, requires the creation of a community of conscience, requires the order, the structure of a community from within which can be generated the ideals, the knowledge and, above all, the new men and women who can bring light to the whole of society. That is what Jefferson can represent as a hope to us as seekers of truth and moral authenticity.

And, say what one will about the motivations of the men who crafted the Constitution in the oppressive summer of 1787, they became, while they were there, a community that worked

at respecting and listening to one another. It was not only immediate self-interest that enabled them to step back from their agendas and their passionately held opinions. To believe that is to believe that “self-interest” is always a demeaning impulse. It is not; it depends entirely on, as it were, the nature of the “self” that one is serving. The Constitutional Convention can represent a deeply philosophical meaning if we remember well that the entire company and their proceedings were constantly under the eye and in the formidable presence of George Washington, who said little, but who *was* much. And, at the other end of the room, so to say, there was the mind and voice of Benjamin Franklin constantly at the ready, articulating the search for the unique blend of practical prudence and spiritual idealism that renders him, by himself, a symbol of the inner quest in the midst of active, resourceful ordinary life.

Under the influence of Washington’s presence and under the scrutiny of Franklin’s intelligence, the representatives of the thirteen colonies found themselves drawn into a process of communal exchange that opened them to a wisdom that no one of them and no separate group of them could have reached alone. As a symbol of one key aspect of the kind of communal relationship that is needed in the search for truth, the Constitutional Convention stands for us at the very root of the American story.

Our Crimes and Ourselves

Turning to the crimes of America, it is imperative that we internalize them as well. By that what is meant is that it is imperative that we seek the power of deeply feeling man’s inhumanity to man. While striving outwardly to eradicate injustice, it is imperative that humanity strive inwardly to feel the sorrow of its own capacity for evil. The American story contains the lightning bolt of that revelation as do few other historical narratives. Uniquely clear and astonishing is the moral contradiction of a nation founded so brilliantly on the ideals of freedom and its actions of brutality and oppression.

The point is that conscience is the only sure guide to moral action, and conscience is often heard only in a whisper and only for a moment. It often happens that a flash of deep moral feeling prompts a long train of action which soon loses its mooring in the full understanding that came originally from conscience. And in such cases, it often happens that action becomes a screen covering the truth of conscience rather than an expression and extension of it into the world. While maintaining the verbal formulation of the ideals given by a moment of moral vision, the action deviates in quality and form, and even in aim, from the original impulse, and does so without the actor's awareness. Slavery and racism are surely such deviations from the ideal of equality and freedom; the destruction of the Indian and his culture is surely just such a deviation from the vision of human rights that forms the heart and spine of the American philosophy.

A key factor in this phenomenon of deviation, and one that we are obliged to study in ourselves, is that it takes place in the dark, screened from our awareness, and under the banner of the very moral ideals from which it is deviating. Our capacity to avert our awareness from the moral and metaphysical contradictions of our nature is a fact that cannot be seen and studied without a serious commitment to truth and without help from companions and from the teachings of wisdom that call to us through the ages.

One needs to try to enter the position not only of the victim, *but of the oppressor*. It is not hard to imagine, up to a certain point, of course, the suffering of the slave or the brutalized Indian. What is in its way much harder, but absolutely essential, is to let oneself feel what it was like to murder and brutalize wrapped in a sure sense of self-justification. And if we have worked to understand the greatness of the humanity we have destroyed and the greatness of the culture we have annihilated, and if we then can imagine ourselves as the agents of these actions, we may catch a glimpse of this deep-rooted phenomenon of moral autohypnosis, the sleep of

conscience, the sorrowful capacity of fallen man to hide from our profound betrayal of the good in our actual and potential actions.

It is imperative that the seeker confront this aspect of oneself in the midst of everyday life as well as in one's place as part of mankind's actions in the sweep of history. We need myths, symbols and stories that make us both raise our head in the vision of authentic human dignity and lower our head in the vision of authentic remorse—and then to prepare us to live our lives with eyes and head straight forward stepping into the future of the new America we may discover in ourselves and of the old Earth which is yearning for all of us to become genuine men and women of the soul.

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CODA

And now, Walt Whitman, give us words for the journey:

I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our states. But woe to the age and land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas. As fuel to flame, and flame to the heavens, so must wealth, science, materialism—even this democracy of which we make so much—unerringly feed the highest mind, the soul...

To take expression, to incarnate...to achieve spiritual meanings, and suggest the future—these only satisfy the soul. We must not say one word against real materials; but the wise know that they do not become real till touched by emotions, the mind.

We see that almost everything that has been written, sung, or stated, of old, with reference to humanity under the feudal and oriental institutes, religions, and for other lands, needs to be re-written, re-sung, in terms consistent with the institution of these states...

I say of all this tremendous and dominant play of solely materialistic bearings upon the current life in the United States, with the results as already seen, accumulating and reaching far into the future, that they must either be confronted and met by at least an equally subtle and tremendous force-infusion for purposes of spiritualization, for the pure conscience, for genuine esthetics, and for absolute and primal manliness and

womanliness—or else our modern civilization, with all its improvements, is in vain, and we are on the road to a destiny, a status, equivalent, in its real world, to that of the fabled damned...

For history is long, long, long. Shift and turn the combinations of the statement as we may, the problem of the future of America, is in certain respects as dark as it is vast. Pride, competition, segregation, vicious willfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan? Flaunt it as we choose, athwart and over the roads of our progress loom huge uncertainty, and dreadful, threatening gloom. It is useless to deny it: Democracy grows rankly up the thickest, noxious, deadliest plants and fruits of all—brings worse and worse invaders—needs newer, larger, stronger, keener compensations and compellers...

You said in your soul, I will be empire of empires, overshadowing all else, past and present, putting the history of old-world dynasties, conquests behind me, as of no account—making a new history, a history of democracy, making old history a dwarf—I alone inaugurating largeness, culminating time. If these, O lands of America, are indeed the prizes, the determinations of your soul, be it so. But behold the cost, and already specimens of the cost. Thought you greatness was to ripen for you like a pear? If you would have greatness, know that you must conquer it through ages, centuries—must pay for it with a proportionate price. For you too, as for all lands, the struggle, the traitor, the wily person in office, scrofulous wealth, the surfeit of prosperity, the demonism of greed, the hell of passion, the decay of faith, the long postponement, the fossil-like lethargy, the ceaseless need of revolutions, prophets, thunderstorms, deaths, births, new projections and invigorations of ideas and men...

America demands a poetry that is bold, modern, and all-surrounding and cosmical, as she is herself. It must in no respect ignore science and the modern, but inspire itself with science and the modern...Like America, it must extricate itself from even the greatest models of the past, and, while courteous to them, must have entire faith in itself, and the products of its own democratic spirit only...Long enough have the People been listening to

poems in which common humanity, deferential, bends low, humiliated, acknowledging superiors. But America listens to no such poems...

As we have shown the New World including in itself the all-leveling aggregate of democracy, we shall also including the all-varied, all-permitting, all-free theorem of individuality, and erecting therefore a lofty and hitherto unoccupied framework or platform, broad enough for all, eligible to every farmer and mechanic—to the female equally with the male—a towering self-hood, not physically perfect only—not satisfied with the mere mind's and learning's stores, but religious, possessing the idea of the infinite...realizing, above the rest, that known humanity, in deepest sense, is fair adhesion to itself, for purposes beyond—and that, finally, the personality of mortal life is most important with reference to the immortal, the unknown, the spiritual, the only permanently real, which as the ocean waits for and receives the rivers, waits for us each and all...

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ⁱ Psalm 1. The King James translation reads, “The way of the wicked shall perish.” The Hebrew is simple and concrete and could even be rendered as “The way of the wicked will *peeter out*, the meaning being that the actions of the unrighteous go against the laws of the universe and, as such, can give no real results.

ⁱⁱ “Politics,”(The Library of America, *Essays, Second Series.*) p. 338

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} Carl Sandburg, *Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years and the War Years* (New York: Dell Publishing Co., Laurel Edition, Vol. 3) p. 808.

^v *Ibid.*, p. 802
