

# The Possibility of America

## *How the Gospel Can Mend Our God-Blessed, God-Forsaken Land*

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## Chapter 2

# For Mine Own Good All Causes Shall Give Way

*When I asked her who killed the man and why, she said, “An Evil Spirit killed him. You gotta be a good girl or it will kill you too.” So since I was seven, I had lived in fear of that “Evil Spirit.” It took me eight years to learn what that spirit was.*

—Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*

*So come out of those ugly molds and remember good is better than evil because it’s nicer to have around you. It’s just as simple as that.*

—William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*

*This train is known as the Black Diamond Express to Hell. Sin is the engineer, Pleasure is the headlight, and the Devil is the conductor.*

—Rev. A. W. Nix, “Black Diamond Express To Hell,” part 1

Any lengthy consideration about what telecommunication has done to the American mind can draw some incredibly helpful wisdom from onetime president of CBS News Fred Friendly. Played by George Clooney in *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), he’s often referred to as the other half of Edward R. Murrow. Friendly was an indefatigable journalist who believed that his vocation (and that of any organization that aims to report what can rightly be called “news”) was to provide individuals with information on which they can actually act. What is more, he believed that journalists have a moral responsibility to resist the pressure to reduce news to best-selling “news product” that simply confirms the prejudices of a targeted audience and should strive instead to tell it like it is in such a way that the viewer is drawn into the agony of having to make a decision. According to Friendly, the journalist’s job is to

create a pain in the audience's mind so intense that it can be relieved only by thinking. Given this conviction concerning the role of the press in a functioning democracy, he felt compelled to resign his position in 1966, when network executives canceled live broadcasts of testimony on the subject of Vietnam before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, opting instead to air sitcom reruns.

Like Rod Serling, Friendly believed that television was an almost unimaginably powerful tool for positive social change, but it also had the potential to become nothing more than a high-tech totem pole of mass hypnosis that serves the ends of multinational corporations and the governments that serve them. Noting the pattern whereby content is driven by ratings, which drives the advertising that funds the operation ("Promotional consideration provided by . . ."), Friendly eventually observed that "television makes so much at its worst that it can't afford to do its best."<sup>1</sup> He would later pine for the days when news programs would regularly feature people lost in thought or ready to admit that a particular issue would require more thinking before a comment would be prudent. In Friendly's ideal future, television might have often featured the rare happening of people actually changing their minds or conceding a point in a conversation. But it wasn't to be. So much for Socratic dialogue beaming its way into a nation's living spaces.

Trying to imagine what Friendly would have made of the social media to come can have me wanting to throw my cell phone through the window, but the habits of mind he worried over and the challenges of sustained attention, of slowing the tape, and of responding thoughtfully instead of reacting impulsively to the media content placed before us are probably merely intensified by the technologies that populate our lives. Social media amplifies, for better or worse, our passions. If the practices that make for toxicity (degradation, humiliation, and accusation) are our primary moves, these tools can serve as a quick delivery system for that dubious skill set. But we can play the healing game of thoughtfulness and right remembrance too. What follows is an attempt to chart the latter path of leveling carefully with ourselves and others and exercising the joys of responsibility befitting Beloved Community in a culture that often mistakes heat for light and projection for fact.

## TO SPIN IS HUMAN

Advocates of civil discourse as an indispensable aspect of a stable democracy will want to affirm the legacy of Fred Friendly. But this is an especially difficult affirmation to keep a grip on in a mass-media age of everything all of the time. Friendly hoped to amplify, perpetuate, and expand the space of the "talkaboutable," literacy as a party to which everyone is invited. Keeping our

hearts and minds safe for democracy involves a widespread moral imagination, a people who enjoy the thrill of a well-articulated argument and are capable of distinguishing between information and accusation.

Needless to say, we've found ourselves in a cultural climate that appears increasingly incapable of teaching or even valuing the skills required to think coherently about ourselves or to properly converse with each other. Ours is a sound-bite culture that often resents complexity and lacks the patience to listen to (or read) any account of people, places, or events that doesn't somehow confirm what we already thought. One pitfall of this situation is that it eventually becomes a sort of feedback loop playing over in our heads even when we aren't tuned into our screens. Our minds become populated with the slogans, sayings, and memes that made us feel strong, vindicated, and in control when we first took them in. It's hard to part with anything that seems to fend off chaos.

Sooner or later, we avoid the company of people who don't nod knowingly when we say what's what or respond favorably to what we post on our feeds, and we unknowingly define our community by the people who seem to agree with us or who have at least learned to dutifully avoid particular topics in our company. Tragically, it can become what we mean when we think of friendship. We become our own issue silo (or death cult), and the algorithms are there to keep us rutting within it. We are easy prey, we know too well, for automated disinformation campaigns.

Ancient wisdom tells us that it's the insane person who can't change his mind and won't change the subject. If the light that is in you is darkness, Jesus warns, how great is that darkness. Consider the investigative insight of this aphorism. People can become so inured to what doesn't fit their own conception of self that they mistake an ever-thickening darkness for light and seal themselves up in an active mind-set of militant ignorance, improvising a defense against any moral realization. "Bias" comes to function as a magic word that can be made to shut down incoming data. With a word like "bias," I can rationalize away every fact, every honest word attempted in my presence, the lived experience of millions.

If, as Islamic tradition teaches us, the true jihad is the inner jihad (the true struggle is the inner struggle), to be human is to be biased. To be human is to be situated within a particular context within which we might yet struggle more righteously. Impartial judgment is a noble and hopeful pursuit, rather than a boast, for those of us who try to live with the awareness that we only see through a glass darkly. Like humility, it probably isn't the kind of attribute someone can possess knowingly. We spin, whether beautifully or toxically, whenever we speak. If we claim to be without spin, we lie to ourselves and the truth is not in us. We might just as well claim we have conquered anger or selfishness or finiteness. But advertising language (which, by definition, misleads) is not accountable to confessions of mortality and can decree itself fair and

balanced with an audiovisual blitzkrieg. It can present itself as being without spin and is more than able to cast the first stone. With the backing of a media conglomerate, pundits can vouchsafe a sense of false community and sound mindedness on anyone who gives the Amen to their view of the cosmos. The listener gratefully reciprocates the passing of the peace of mind (I think what you think), a commodity that sells itself.

If we take Lincoln's meditations on divinity (your pounding pulse is not the Holy Spirit) and Presley's cryptic triumph over television as exemplary moments in Americans' struggles to more accurately perceive ourselves and our place in the world, we might say we're at our best when we're at our most bewildered, when we're eager to have our made-up minds undone by new and better testimonies, when we want truth spoken to our own power, and when we're afraid of our own anxious tendency to dismiss information that might make us think twice about ourselves. Self-congratulatory paranoia might sell and, to some minds, popular witlessness might even strengthen the economy, but a nation of sociopaths isn't in a position to project democratic values on the world. America as a commodity becomes less appealing to the global village when America presents itself as a creature that listens only to itself. It's hard to appreciate a service provider that denies all negative feedback in advance of hearing it.

With this in mind, our ability to feel disaffected with the self-referential stories we've clung to, discovering (blessedly) that we don't know the half of it, might be the nearest available avenue toward Beloved Community. We can turn around at any time. And given the ease with which the alleged representatives of the American people consistently downgrade America's brand identity, undertaking this work right in conscious relationship with the other 96 percent of the world's population is not unrelated to the popular abstraction of national security.

## I BELIEVE IN MY HEART

The hours we spend tuned in as a captive audience to the princes of the power of the airwaves and the ease with which we can convince ourselves we've scored a point in a debate with a keyboard or a click of the mouse have left many Americans in a lonely bind. Tragically, our yearning for community makes us especially vulnerable as host bodies for whatever force might hold a megaphone closest to our ears, and the hype that gets hold of us won't generally make us more loving in our responses to friends and family. We're free-floating, unnerved, and easily susceptible to multimillion-dollar, manufactured versions of reality.

On top of this, we have that much-touted notion of American individualism that, in one sense, is inseparable from the trajectory (from Moses to

Beyoncé) we're celebrating. The American creed (no insignificant person was ever born) exalts the human being as the infinitely valuable bearer of God's image and eventually deems every person as so endowed with dignity that all are to be accorded, with all deliberate speed, rights. But this insight, divorced from its historical moorings and lived awareness of the generations who struggled against the brutalizing of humans as fodder for the gods, can make people rather nasty, brutish, and blissfully egotistical, with little understanding of the hard-won humanism they've inherited at great cost. Spirit, like Beloved Community, knows no division. When we lose a sense of all the words to be had and all the pain endured and soul sustained to get us here, we're prone to forget that human rights weren't discovered by statesmen or scientists. In polite American company (as of this writing), humans are deemed worthy of food, shelter, education, and trial by jury, but it's the creative yield of Beloved Community (Marguerite Porete, Fannie Lou Hamer, Pauli Murray) that instructs the powerful, over time, to believe as much.

But the exaltation of one's own gut feeling can cut both ways, especially when it exalts as somehow sacrosanct the isolated delusions of men with power over others. In practice, this leads to a hopeless privileging of personal fantasy, over observable fact, as the definitive and binding take on reality. Mistaking the still, small voice in our heads for absolute truth isn't a uniquely American heresy, but combined with the deifying of whatever it is we might mean when we talk about the ineffable virtue of following our hearts, one prevalent understanding of personal strength becomes an insane sense of personal infallibility. Being true to oneself, in the most vapid sense, might simply be a matter of being true to one's endlessly self-justifying ego.

In our age of "hurry up and matter!" the practice of pause, of consistently slowing the tape of the story and spin we intake, can feel like a career liability, a privilege the upwardly mobile and aspiringly "impactful" people can't afford. This pattern can make all of us professional politicians and the victims of our own self-publicity and that of famous others. It can feel as if there's no escaping it.

At the risk of homing in on the example of a considerably famous person to the exclusion of the rest of us, I'd like to consider the case of Ronald Reagan. Like anyone whose presumed power depends upon believing (or pretending to believe) whatever it appears expedient to believe from one moment to the next, he lived much of his life in a psychic pickle. The question of expedience is always with us, but devoting too much of our lives to it can deplete the conscience considerably. Our hold on reality can prove disturbingly—even perversely—malleable. When forced by the 1987 Tower Commission Report to consider again his public denial of involvement in the Iran-Contra affair, Reagan offered his viewers at home an odd statement that illustrates the phenomena I have in mind: "I told the American people I did not trade arms for

hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that's true, but the facts and the evidence tell me it is not."<sup>2</sup>

For Americans, an elected official's pattern of evasion often mimics, by design, that of the culture over which that office presides. In some phantasmagoric bid, the job isn't just to conjure but to somehow *be* the product of enough gerrymandered voters' preferred imaginings. I hasten to add that this brand of egotism isn't the sole property of any particular political party, economic class, or group. "I believe in my heart" is a stunningly effective phrase in the perception of the American public, if the polls are to be believed, and presidents can refer to their "heart of hearts" and talk about the unique truth of what's deep down in their hearts as if feeling something deeply is an argument in itself. G. K. Chesterton famously observed that the highest concentrations of people who most intensely believe in themselves aren't to be left on their own recognizance, but, taking a page out of Joseph Goebbels's notes, we can be assured that unquestioning self-confidence still somehow feelingly persuades.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues document one particular form of American self-worship and identify it as "Sheilaism," the professed, private faith of a young nurse named Sheila Larson (a pseudonym) who named her most consistent religious conviction after herself. She's quick to point out that she believes in God, but she isn't religious: "My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own small voice."<sup>3</sup> Self-love and being gentle with herself concerning possible shortcomings are her primary creeds. The authors don't question that Sheila has had experiences with a living God, but it does seem clear that God, viewed exclusively through the lens of rampant Sheilaism, can become nothing more than "the self magnified."<sup>4</sup>

Given the mental fight one has to undertake to hear oneself above the din of other people's projections, sales pitches, and empty promises, I don't begrudge Sheila her hard-won discernment of her own small voice for a second. There are so many ways we're taught to doubt and grow estranged from our own best intuition, the lively genius many within Beloved Community believe lies buried in every living person, even when we're reading teleprompted words we've been told we have to say aloud to avoid impeachment proceedings.

But there's more than one way to believe your own heart. My preferred text for undertaking this life's work rightly is Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, a movable feast of healing, discernment, despair unto death, and communal exorcism. In a revolving cast of characters whose wise utterances speak to one another's psychic dramas sometimes purposefully and sometimes accidentally, one of them, Sophie Heywood, insists that "every event is preceded by a sign." Who has the authority to interpret them? That would be everyone who's ever lived: "We're all clairvoyant if we'd only know it."<sup>5</sup>

Try that. Know your own clairvoyance together with others. There is no other way.



## THE CHRIST CODE

Like other Americans, our presidents often appear to embrace a variation of the Quaker doctrine of the inner light of Christ, but with the absence of anything in the way of communal discernment or accountability that might call into question the confidence with which a person heeds the voice in one's heart. "Personal religious experience" seems to strike an acceptable note in many a voter's minds, even as too visible a lived accountability to any visible community of faith (present or past) is viewed as a liability. Amid his own bid for the presidency, Barack Obama had to publicly disassociate from the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who'd performed his wedding, once YouTube footage surfaced in which he made the same distinctions between God's kingdom and the United States that Martin Luther King Jr. dramatized constantly. Mike Pence and John Kerry can claim affiliation with the Roman Catholic Church while assuring the people that no church teaching or papal decree will have any actual effect on their decision making. And in what we need not assume was a calculated move, then Texas governor George W. Bush won the approval of millions in a primary debate by citing "Christ" as his favorite political philosopher. Needless to say, no moderator invited him to offer specifics on how his foreign policy or his position on capital punishment would line up with the Sermon on the Mount (political philosophy, after all), but this is well in keeping with what we've come to expect of the mass-market version of American Christianity. The actual politics of Jesus aren't on the table. How is it, then, that Jesus influences? "Because he changed my heart." When his interlocutor hinted that the American people might desire a little more elaboration, Bush smiled and observed, "If they don't know, it's going to be hard to explain."<sup>6</sup>

And . . . this generalization worked like a charm. It's what millions of people are referring to when they say that they know Christ as their savior. I don't mean to imply disingenuousness on the part of anyone when I suggest that this way of characterizing one's connection to Jesus is a heresy at best and a sign of the spirit of antichrist at worst. Harold Bloom has suggested that "knowing" Christ, believing yourself to have a one-on-one relationship with him (unmediated by tradition; "in the garden alone"; impossible to explain to anyone who doesn't know him like you do), is hardly more than a couple of centuries old and unique to the American experience.<sup>7</sup> Minus the obligation to aspire toward continuity with a historic, visible, practicing community (based in some recognizable fashion on what Jesus of Nazareth said and did), we're left alone with what we believe in our hearts our personalized Christ is telling us. The nonpolitical, fully spiritualized Christ asset opens doors in America.

As a cautionary measure against our tendency to tell ourselves the Christ in our heart of hearts is telling us to do whatever we've already decided to do, providentially blessing the presidential administration of an unrepentant

sexual assailant, or that the Bible somehow buttresses whatever we feel is right, Beloved Community affords us the opportunity to recognize ourselves as fallible discerners of whatever it is the Holy Spirit is saying to the churches who are nevertheless invited to partake of communal clairvoyance. Trying to be faithful to this spirit, perceiving it with fear and trembling, is what Beloved Community does. The word “Christ” (a title, and not Jesus’ last name) can’t simply be inarguable shorthand for a personal sense of rightness, as if there’s nothing to talk about and nothing to be explained. In some circles, it almost seems to function as a code word for white nationalism disguised as Christianity. To genuinely confess Jesus as the Messiah is to insist that his politics—his way of being in the world—goes, that his teachings are to be pursued as normative. It mustn’t just be a secret handshake for those who are “in the know” concerning the importance of a certain kind of “spiritual component” that will have little or nothing to say on the subject of the disenfranchised, the incarcerated, or the devastation of the natural world. When someone claims to know him (or that someone else doesn’t) is it a reference to the Beloved Community of Jesus and the prophets, or is it prayer coverage for the military-industrial-entertainment-incarceration complex?

## YOU HAVE TO BE WHOLE TO SEE WHOLE

Within American popular discourse, the reigning standard that protects the latter from the former seems as natural as the air we breathe. It’s the culture of endless war that’s sacrosanct, and woe to anyone who’d dare to even imply that “religion” can be brought to bear upon it. We have chaplains for that. This is the move whereby George W. Bush can brand-associate with Christ as his preferred political philosopher in one context and intone the following when asked how an alleged man of prayer can order preemptive war:

I don’t bring God into my life to be a political person. I ask God for strength and guidance. I ask God to help me be a better person. But the decision about war and peace was a decision I made based upon what I thought were the best interests of the American people. I was able to step back from religion, because I have a job to do. And I, on bended knee to the good Lord, asked Him to help me to do my job in a way that’s wise.<sup>8</sup>

As a testimonial, this is a powerful portrait of popular conception of, as the saying goes, “the role of religion,” and it should be familiar to all of us. There is a pathos at work, and it’s reflected in the way a person balances career with other commitments, designating some areas of life (business, worship, recreation) and dividing them up from one another. Many Americans feel obliged to put our faith to the side when we’re buying and selling, the way we go about being realistic. Bush is relating a tale concerning the struggle of vocation, of

faithfulness to a job with certain demands that might not coincide with the language usually associated with religion, of a human heart in conflict with itself. This view of God as a nonpolitical being that we can bring in for wisdom and comfort and keep respectfully separate from our business, our “job to do,” is a view held by Americans across party lines, and it will often be hard to remember that it bears no resemblance to anything any sacred tradition has ever considered orthodox. Nevertheless, it’s standard procedure.

And in a faithful reflection of these designations, we hold prophetic consciousness at a distance while simultaneously giving lip service to the sacrosanct status of everybody’s private, personal faith. Getting the job done, living in the real world, and being effective, it is believed, require keeping one thing separate from another if we’re to overcome these conflicts of interests. We’re back to the question of expedience and the divisions it demands.

But spirit knows no division, and the kingdom of God won’t relinquish its righteous prerogatives so easily. There is no stepping back from the fact of relationship. To try to step back from Beloved Community is to step into estrangement from self and others. Needless to say, no one whose first allegiance is to the reign of God and God’s righteousness can ultimately settle for the title of “spiritual adviser” or a position as chaplain for a corporation or an ostensibly sovereign nation-state. A witness to it can’t merely serve as someone’s “theological underpinnings” or “religious influence.” Beloved Community is committed to twenty-four-hour coverage, an unending appeal to hearts, minds, and bodies, and the biblical witness assures us that God wants it all—the earth and everything in it, all authority, because the Spirit that knows no division is being poured out on all flesh, and the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea.

As it summons us to recognize our every entanglement and lean into the fact of our kinship with one another at every turn, it could be that Beloved Community is ultimately an invitation to an utterly unmarketable freedom, an unquantifiable goodness, and a wisdom that won’t fit any sound bites, sales pitches, conferrals of sovereignty, or anyone’s system. In American history, this culture has most often been associated, in some way, with people whose interpretation of the Bible challenged the status quo readings of their times, and its fruits are discernible in lending libraries, the abolitionist movement, women’s suffrage, child labor laws, the rights of indigenous people, and affordable health care. It is its own mode of living and thinking, unendingly open to the worlds it encounters, but in lively tension as it resides within various, never completely accommodating settings.

To be a learner of the larger freedom of Beloved Community requires a long unlearning of habitual defensiveness and self-justification at all costs and an adoption of the easier yoke and lighter burden of vulnerability and even confession. It isn’t subject to our monetizing impulse, and it is on the side of life and liberty in more ways than we can ask for or imagine. You “have to be

whole to see whole,” Bambara’s Sophie Heywood counsels, “There is a world to be redeemed, and it’ll take the cooperation of all righteous folks.”<sup>9</sup>

### ALL LOVELINESS IS ANGUISH TO ME

Meanwhile, there is so much to be confused over in our own heady days as we try to think and see clearly amid the static and the noise. Beloved Community urges us to recognize how prone we already are to distort reality to suit our sense of self, and our electronic devices will often assist us in accelerating this process. By cutting ourselves off from conscious participation in the life that surrounds us, we become less capable of perceiving our own context, and Fred Friendly’s worst-case scenarios are ever before us.

To my mind, Friendly is an especially helpful guide in curbing the contagion. He wouldn’t mistake technology itself for content, but he would always ask if our media consumption is making us more or less capable of distinguishing between usable information and distracting nonissues that only serve to keep us glued, agitated, and addicted. With this kind of methodology, we’re able to think more rigorously as members of Beloved Community and interact more meaningfully with platforms designed, it sometimes seems, to make Gollums of us all.

It might seem odd to bring someone like Nathaniel Hawthorne of *Scarlet Letter* fame into these musings, but a brief character sketch of a guilt-ridden man in one of his short stories (“Roger Malvin’s Burial”) resonates peculiarly well with a character type perhaps made more isolated by the pseudointimacy of remote interactions on social media platforms: “Reuben’s secret thoughts and insulated emotions had gradually made him a selfish man, and he could no longer love deeply except where he saw or imagined some reflection or likeness of his own mind.”<sup>10</sup>

I’m sure I’m projecting more than a little, but this sounds like a mid-1800s forecast of an Internet troll. It’s as if the process has been accelerated as it’s becoming increasingly difficult for many Americans to consider history, information, or even everyday gossip apart from who appears momentarily to benefit the most from the disclosure. There’s a sealing off of self from insight and affection that looks to be an epidemic.

Twitter, for instance, magnifies our passions, for better and worse. It can’t be blamed for the content we broadcast through it. If toxicity—degradation, humiliation, accusation—is our primary game, we’re able to deliver it remotely and quicker. And yet, we can broadcast thoughtfulness too, with an ease that might have amazed and encouraged Fred Friendly. I don’t know if, in the long run, Twitter will prove to have been a net gain for the cause of righteousness in the land of the living, but I know we’re responsible for what we make of it. Out of the depths of the heart, the social media feed speaks.

The anxious pressure we feel in our desire to hear (and then repeat to our families, friends, and coworkers) a sound-bite-worthy solution to what's wrong with the world or a masterful judgment that will fend off all paradox is hostile to everything the biblical witness recognizes as wisdom. Jesus' admonition to "Judge not, lest ye be judged" and to call no person an idiot or a fool while carefully examining ourselves before attempting a word of discernment is binding upon our media input and output as people who, in a very real sense, are never not broadcasting. Fred Friendly anticipated the power we each have to either model the virtues of delayed judgment in the direction of better social practice or to join the rage by inciting ourselves and others toward defensive, endlessly self-justifying postures. Although the open hand is clearly more representative of Beloved Community than the clenched fist, both express the natural desire to keep chaos at bay. But the former recognizes the possibility of madness and crimes against humanity within oneself while the latter rejects, with passionate intensity, the suggestion that we might have a log or two in our own eyes.

The other half of that teaching that is often forgotten is the idea that seeing clearly and genuinely helping is the goal: "Then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye" (Luke 6:39–42). And the goal is a means to the end of actually being present to the life of one's neighbor. But no clear vision is possible for those who boast of (or worse, really believe in) their own logless vision, a vision without spin. We might also recall the folk wisdom offered in Beck's observation that death has a way of creeping in slowly till we feel safe in its arms. Boiling point is only approached in not-quite-discernible stages, and the frog in the beaker won't know what's happening until it's too late.

While evildoers don't self-consciously or publicly recognize themselves as such while fighting to put down other evildoers, literature will often afford us language whereby violent souls actually talk about what they're doing while they're doing it. As Shakespeare always seems to offer an illuminating word for any and all issues that beset us, we now turn to a deeply troubled Macbeth. With his wife's help, he's already talked himself into murdering his king and the one friend who dared to question his career ambitions. As most of us do when we get to scrolling our feeds, he's now looking for a destiny forecast (the witches whose broadcast set him down this path in the first place will do). Wondering how he might best capitalize on events to make sure everything's going his way, he offers the following on how he might best go for the gold:

For mine own good,  
All causes shall give way: I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er:  
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;  
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.<sup>11</sup>

Until recently, I couldn't imagine this brand of bluster being spoken aloud except in sleep, under hypnosis, and by characters in Shakespeare's plays. As a teacher, I collect the cosmic plainspeak that gives voice to our inner dramas, and I'm always trying to apply the words of regicides and other poor players to something a little closer to home. For anyone thinking through personal finances, the hopefully existent consciences of elected officials, and how we got here, there are some lines here that might strike a chord for those of us who saw Donald Trump decree, after winning his party's nomination for president: "It is so nice that the shackles have been taken off me and I can now fight for America the way I want to."<sup>12</sup>

With no vision beyond the inner logic of improvised explanations, Macbeth proclaims, "For mine own good, / All causes shall give way." We're human; therefore we angle and improvise, but if the first thought in our minds when we hear news is, "Does this make my team look good or bad?" or "What does this say about my brand image?" or "What are the optics?" then something might be going awry in our ability to see clearly. What we anxiously perceive as a boon for our own perceived fortunes is often bad news for friends, family, and foreign nations. Macbeth's dismissal of the possibility of regret or repentance (it's too tedious to step back through the blood he's left on the tracks) bears a disturbing resemblance to the false strength of denial, evasion, and blame that is an ever-present temptation within American culture. The pretense of omnipotence might play well in prime time, but it flies in the face of received wisdom from the Bible to Shakespeare to Tolkien.

For a more precise word of challenge against the darker impulses of an often-unacknowledged American mythology, we have an American prophet in Herman Melville. Borrowing heavily from the Bible and Shakespeare, Melville expresses ongoing skepticism about optimism concerning human intuition (Emersonian or otherwise) and seems to think that this might be where the uniquely American trouble starts. The crew of the Pequod are beginning to realize that their captain, Ahab, is tragically fixated on gaining vengeance over an animal blissfully unaware of Ahab's existence. When I behold a friend, neighbor, or family member rant against a politician, whom they've never met and with whom they will never exchange a word, and the tone and demeanor of the talk takes a turn for the apoplectic, I want to adapt Starbuck's words to whale-mad Ahab and cry, "Madness! To be enraged with a face on television seems blasphemous. What profit will thy anger yield thee? Go have a cup of coffee with thy partner or telephone thy child or dine ye with a homeless person."<sup>13</sup> I should add that Starbuck's words come to me self-administered. The allure of issue-driven newspeak has an alarming way of distracting me from the more needful and local concerns that could do with my attention. All too often, the siren song of electronic soul molesters (Baptist minister Will Campbell's term, which I find it helpful to apply to smartphones) draws me away from the company of actual living people.

But what makes Starbuck's rebuke especially tragic is that he hasn't told Ahab anything Ahab doesn't know. Like Macbeth, Ahab is a diligent student of his own downward spiral, and, like many Americans, he knows all is not well in his angry and weary soul. "All loveliness is anguish to me," he confesses, because, like Milton's Satan, he is damned most subtly and malignantly in the midst of paradise. And like Gollum, he can only read the world through the lens of his own covetousness: "I'm demoniac, I am madness maddened! That wild madness that's only calm to comprehend itself!" If anyone feels compelled to accept my advice concerning a twenty-four-hour fast from the highly charged, hot-button words (liberal, conservative, bias, agenda) that keep us from thinking clearly, I'd also like to recommend (alongside Old and New Testament readings) chapter 37 of *Moby-Dick*, from which these phrases are drawn. Ahab feels his brain beating against what seems like the solid metal of a steel skull and imagines the path of his fixed purpose to be laid with iron rails, whereon his soul is grooved to run. Long before anyone knew what an Internet was or what the near-omnipresent sensory assault of multinational corporations on the human mind felt like, Melville penned this soliloquy concerning an iron necessity of self-seeking soul destruction, but I suspect there's a timeliness to it that strikes closer to our national psyche than we'd like to admit: "Over unsounded gorges, through the rifled hearts of mountains, under torrents' beds, unerringly I rush! Naught's an obstacle, naught's an angle to the iron way!"<sup>14</sup>

## I CONTAIN MULTITUDES

Starting from weirded-out Nashville, where I was born, I was taught (like Ahab, Starbuck, and perhaps every American president) to view myself in some sense as an eternal soul. Haunted by the thought of what this might mean and alarmed at how cavalier most of my comrades were on the subject of eternity, I mostly associated this preoccupation with church services and that black Bible I figured I'd better read all the way through before it was too late. I don't regret my early childhood preoccupation with eternity in any way, but I know I was often tempted to view any and all life that didn't line up with my thoughts of eternity as tragically irrelevant to everything that really mattered, because all that mattered (wasn't it obvious?) was eternity.

To the extent that I began to view my passion for eternity as somehow nearer to the appropriate level of intensity than the passion levels of my peers, I suppose I fit the description of what is often termed a fundamentalist. But I don't think this habit of mind and imagination is limited to those who consider themselves religious, since demonizing the opposition appears to be what many of us fall into whenever we don't know what to do with our despair. To my thinking, it was with the presumed backing of the eternal that I passed

reluctant judgment on all the interesting worldly things that, as far as I could tell, had no inheritance in the infinite. My enjoyment of the not eternally significant day-to-day was made only a little bit guilty by my suspicion that it was all going to burn. I had yet to view the Lord's Prayer as a calling of God's kingdom "on earth," and I probably viewed heaven as a little more like a netherworld or a phantom zone. This sad doctrine of unincarnate faith (mostly constructed in my own mind) began to be challenged in a high school English class when I turned in my literature book to a section called "Transcendentalism" and thought, "That's more like it."

What a word: transcendentalist. And what a thing to be. The whole thing seemed remarkably and scandalously grounded. Could I really have it both ways? Heaven and earth? Walt Whitman seemed to think so: "The SOUL: Forever and forever—longer than soil is brown and solid—longer than water ebbs and flows." And even better: "I say the whole earth, and all the stars in the sky, are for Religion's sake."<sup>15</sup>

Here was a poetry of new potentialities and an affirmation of what I'd begun to glimpse in the paintings of Howard Finster, what I'd already seen in particular episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, and what I thought I was hearing in the music of Suzanne Vega, Lone Justice, and R.E.M., a uniquely American mysticism I was tempted to call country music—comprehensive and curious but confident at nobody's expense. What does this have to do with the national psyche?

For one thing, it points in the direction of an alternative to the death-dealing dichotomies that drive so much best-selling, most-viewed deliberation on America, the rest of the world, and the future; an alternative to the Ahab curse that hastens America's nervous breakdown. Just as Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" will insist that all things human are somehow scandalously holy, Whitman submits, as a to-be-agreed-on basis for all speech and conversation and politics, the creed that all matter is charged with the grandeur of God; that the spiritual resides within all material (no nonspiritual, secular, or nonsouled human beings). We won't see clearly until we look humbly: "Bring all the art and science of the world, and baffle and humble it with one spear of grass."<sup>16</sup> As Macbeth and Ahab look upon creation, they feel mocked and anxious that life won't deliver on their mad desires or that they'll lose the ground they've insanely concluded is their own and no one else's. The affection that should have gone into treasuring the life around us, the people nearby, gets drained by our contempt for whoever's on the wrong side of our beloved issues. The beauty and complexity of the created world becomes irrelevant to our fixations. Against the blind and unreasoning rush, Whitman describes a single blade of grass as the journey-work of the stars.

I can hardly think of Whitman's insistent hopefulness without imagining the witness of Studs Terkel, whose hope for America (like Whitman's) always includes the notion of outgoing love as a moral imperative. Specifically, I recall a moment on television when Terkel was shown a copy of Nick Ut's 1972



Pulitzer Prize-winning photo of nine-year-old Kim Phuc, naked and on fire, fleeing a napalm attack. When asked what the image brought to his mind, Terkel quickly responded that this is our child, everybody's child, a moment of anguish for all people, an occasion for grief and urgent communal embrace. Our child. Not someone else's. Ours. Us. Terkel casually makes an appeal to the conservatively communal sensibility that insists on a reverencing of children, the ancient folk wisdom that says you should never walk past or look upon a child without speaking a word of blessing. And with an unmistakable degree of authority as an experienced connoisseur of American culture, Terkel seems to suggest that the meaning of America resides in our ability to say, without qualification, "Our child."

For many Americans, life is so full of persecution complex, fears of being tricked or made to feel guilty, and anxious anticipation of spin that we've come close to losing our ability to listen and look without defensiveness. We risk becoming unable to look at or speak to the world without assuming an adversarial posture, so in love with our abstractions that we can't look at human beings properly. We can hardly think of suffering children without feeling manipulated by an interest group. It doesn't have to be this way. And if we're going to engage the world without losing our souls, we won't let it be. Or as Sly and the Family Stone remind us, we're going to have to adjust our sense of self and topple the tyranny of mad individualism, because we have to live together. We don't have to hold ourselves aloof from the troubled everybody who people our everyday. We are they. We're everyday people, and everybody is a star.

Long after I discovered Whitman in my high school years, it was pointed out to me that the Lord's Prayer isn't a call to be transported from the wicked world into unearthly, disembodied bliss but a call for God's abundance, God's shalom. It is a call to be fully manifested on earth as it already is in the heavens, a cry for regime change within a largely rebellious world that does not acknowledge its Maker in the way it treats people or regards itself. And all language, whether broadcast by entertainment conglomerates, news networks, or radio talk-show hosts and their avid listeners, is unavoidably, if unconsciously, religious. We can't speak of people or politics without speaking of the eternal. I began to remember what Fannie Lou Hamer and Dorothy Day never forgot: It's all religion, whether we like it or not. In Whitman's invocation of American ensemble (always looking to bring in all nations, "I'd sow a seed for thee of endless nationality"), a note of eschatological hope is struck.

I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait.<sup>17</sup>

Roaming in thought over the Universe, I saw the little that is Good steadily  
hastening towards immortality,  
And the vast all that is call'd Evil I saw hastening to merge itself and become  
lost and dead.<sup>18</sup>

As the American creed of liberty and justice for all humanity takes on new and unexpected forms beyond the limitations of whatever we've settled for in the way of unequal justice and license mistaken for liberty, a vigilance against our Ahab-like mind-sets will be crucial. Religion is practice. Politics is practice. Religion is politics is what we do and how we speak and the way we think about other human beings. And America's cultural heritage is blessedly fraught with voices that won't let us forget it. Whitman's musings and Terkel's casual remark concerning the image of a child that many Americans once imagined to be an enemy of freedom are touchstones. As touchstones of Beloved Community, they can reactivate our moral imagination against our darker trends of world-as-vampire, midnight vultures, and big-fish-eat-little-one, which often portray themselves as homeland security issues, free trade, and, tragically, the American way. Fred Friendly believed there was more room for more rich conversation than we've even begun to guess and that there are myriad wise voices not yet amplified within our national life. The voices bear ample witness against the myopic moralism that falls so short of our more comprehensive, compassionate best. Do we have the ears to hear? Do we want to?

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