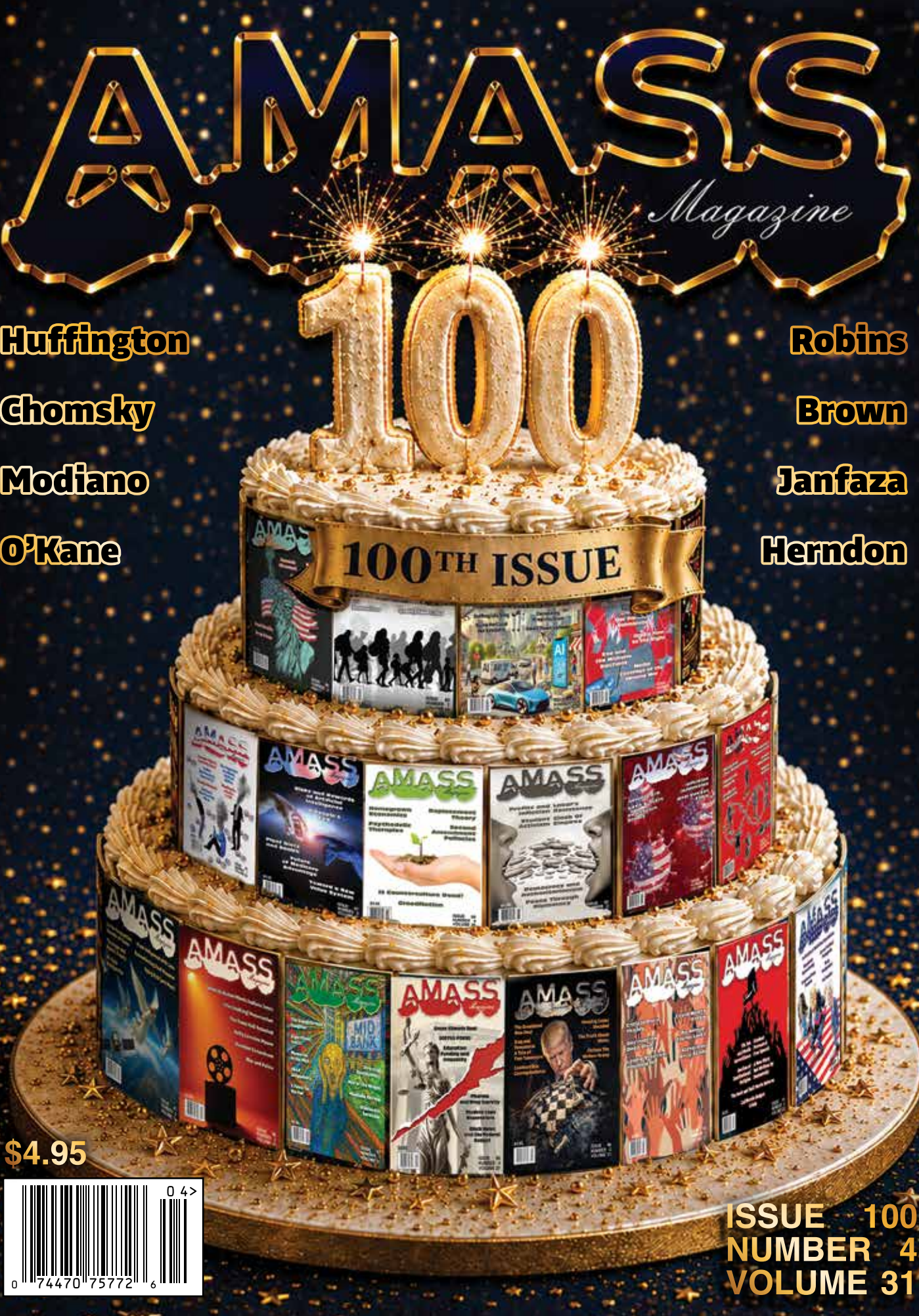
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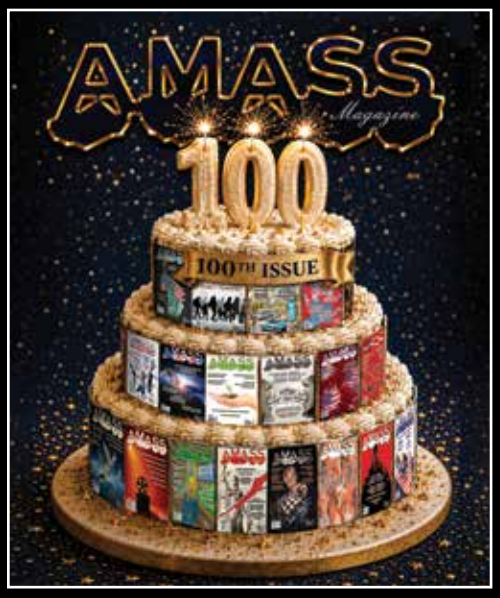
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COVER:
"The Big Cake"
Heli Swensson



"The Big Cake"
Cover Design by Heli Swensson

Finally, a magazine cover that's good enough to eat! It was conceived and created by our designer, Heli Swensson, who can now add the title of "cake decorator" to her impressive list of accomplishments. The occasion? The 100th issue of *AMASS*. To kick off this milestone edition, we're reprinting three articles from the archive by Arianna Huffington, Noam Chomsky, and Richard Modiano, followed by the quarterly smorgasbord of politics, culture, reviews, commentary, and new fiction.

Also contained herein are five cartoons reprinted from past issues by Richard Vaughn.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank you, our readers, for keeping this magazine alive and kicking in this era of clickbait and content.

See you next issue.

- Dan Marcus

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OPINION

MEMO TO OBAMA: MOVING TO THE MIDDLE IS FOR LOSERS

ARIANNA HUFFINGTON

Last Friday afternoon, the guests taking part in Sunday's roundtable discussion on *This Week* had a pre-show call with George Stephanopoulos. One of the topics he raised was Obama's perceived move to the center, and what it means. Thus began my weekend obsession. If you were within shouting distance of me, odds are we talked about it. I talked about it over lunch with *HuffPost's* DC team, over dinner with friends, with the doorman at the hotel, and the driver on the way driver to the airport.

As part of this process, I looked at the Obama campaign not through the prism of my own progressive views and beliefs but through the prism of a cold-eyed campaign strategist who has no principles except winning. From that point of view, and taking nothing else into consideration, I can unequivocally say: the Obama campaign is making a very serious mistake. Tacking to the center is a losing strategy. And don't let the latest head-to-head poll numbers lull you the way they lulled Hillary Clinton in December.

The Obama brand has always been about inspiration, a new kind of politics, the audacity of hope, and "change we can believe in."

– Arianna Huffington

Running to the middle in an attempt to attract undecided swing voters didn't work for Al Gore in 2000. It didn't work for John Kerry in 2004. And it didn't work when Mark Penn (obsessed with his "microtrends" and missing the megatrend) convinced Hillary Clinton to do it in 2008.

Fixating on--and pandering to--this fickle crowd is all about messaging tailored to avoid offending rather than to inspire and galvanize. And isn't galvanizing the electorate to demand fundamental change the raison d'etre of the Obama campaign in the first place? This is how David Axelrod put it at the end of February, contrasting the tired Washington model of "I'll do these things for you" with Obama's "Let's do these things together":

"This has been the premise of Barack's politics all his life, going back to his days as a community organizer. He has really lived and breathed it, which is why it comes across so authentically. Of course, the time also has to be right for the man and the moment to come together. And, after all the country has been through over the last seven years, the times are definitely right for the message that the only way to get real change is to activate the American people to demand it."

Watering down that brand is the political equivalent of New Coke. Call it Obama Zero.

In 2004, the Kerry campaign's obsession with undecided voters--voters so easily swayed that 46 percent of them found credible the Swift Boaters' charges that Kerry might have faked his war wounds to earn a Purple Heart--allowed the race to devolve from a referendum on the future of the country into a petty squabble over whether Kerry had bled enough to warrant his medals.

Throughout the primary, Obama referred to himself as an "unlikely candidate." Which he certainly was, and still is. And one of the things that turned him from "unlikely" upstart to presidential frontrunner is his ability to expand the electorate by convincing unlikely voters--some of the 83 million eligible voters who didn't turn out in 2004--to engage in the system.

So why start playing to the political fence sitters--staking out newly nuanced positions on FISA, gun control laws, expansion of the death penalty, and NAFTA?

In an interview with Nina Easton in *Fortune* Magazine, Obama was asked about having called NAFTA "a big mistake" and "devastating." Obama's reply: "Sometimes during campaigns the rhetoric gets overheated and amplified."

Overheated? So when he was campaigning in the Midwest, many parts of which have been, yes, devastated by economic changes since the passage of NAFTA, and he pledged to make use of a six-month opt-out clause in the trade agreement, that was "overheated?" Or was that one "amplified?"

Because if that's the case, it would be helpful going forward if Obama would let us know which of his powerful rhetoric is "overheated" and/or "amplified," so voters will know not to get their hopes too high.

When Obama kneecaps his own rhetoric and dilutes his positioning as a different kind of politician, he is also giving his opponent a huge opening to reassert the McCain as Maverick brand. We know that McCain has completely abandoned any legitimate claim on his maverick image, but the echoes of that reputation are still very much with us--especially among many in the media who would love nothing more than to be able to once

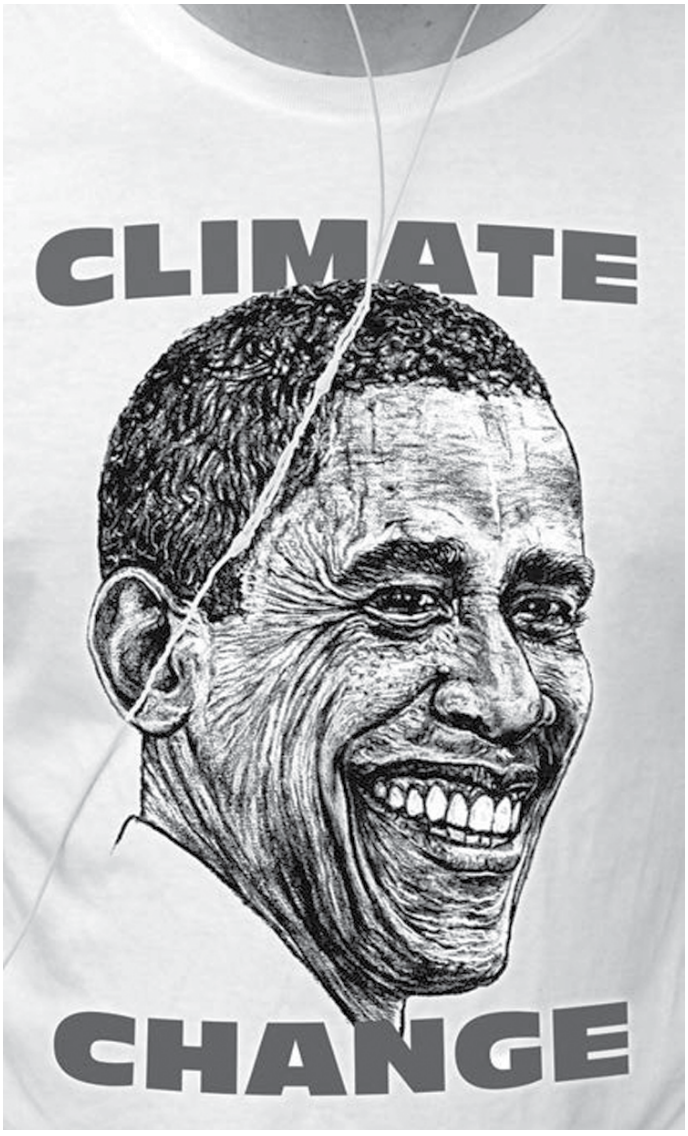


Photo by Amelia Mulkey, Artwork on tee-shirt by Robbie Conal

again portray McCain as the real leader they fell in love with in 2000. And the new Straight Talk Express plane has been modeled on its namesake bus, decked out to better recreate the seduction.

The transition between the primaries and the general election--and from insurgent to front runner--is tricky. Even a confident campaign can be knocked off course. So this is when Obama most needs to remember what got him to this point--and stick with it.

In a *Los Angeles Times* article detailing Obama's attempts at "shifting toward the center," Matt Bennett of the centrist think tank Third Way says that Obama is a "good politician. He's doing all he can to make sure people know he would govern as a post-partisan moderate."

But isn't being a "good politician" as it's meant here exactly what Obama defined himself as being against? Instead of Third Way think tankers, Obama should listen to this guy:

"What's stopped us is the failure of leadership, the smallness of our politics--the ease with which we're distracted by the petty and trivial, our chronic avoidance

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of tough decisions, our preference for scoring cheap political points instead of rolling up our sleeves and building a working consensus to tackle big problems.... The time for that politics is over. It's time to turn the page."

That was Barack Obama in February of 2007, announcing his run for the White House. "I know I haven't spent a lot of time learning the ways of Washington," he said that day, "but I've been there long enough to know that the ways of Washington must change."

Was that just "overheated and amplified" rhetoric?

The Obama brand has always been about inspiration, a new kind of politics, the audacity of hope, and "change we can believe in." I like that brand. More importantly, voters--especially unlikely voters--like that brand.

Pulling it off the shelf and replacing it with a political product geared to pleasing America's vacillating swing voters--the ones who will be most susceptible to the fear-mongering avalanche that has already begun--would be a fatal blunder. Realpolitik is one thing. Realstupidpolitik is quite another.

So, to counter the conventional wisdom pundits, the cautious campaign advisers, and his own inner cautiousness, I'm offering Obama the following suggestions for staying true to the vision and message that took him from longshot "unlikely candidate" to presidential frontrunner--and for avoiding the fate of the many before him who fell prey to the misguided belief that the path to the White House runs down the middle of the road.

1) Load up your Kindle with passages from leaders who were looking to fundamentally change the country and following an inner compass, not the latest focus-group results. Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King would be a good place to start.

"Some men see things as they are and ask, 'Why?' I dream of things that never were and ask, 'Why not?'" (RFK)

"There comes a time when one must take the position that is neither safe nor politic nor popular, but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right." (MLK)

2) Load up your iPod with passages from your own speeches. They've inspired others; now let them re-ignite the inspirational leader in you.

"This campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us--it must be about what we can do together.



This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams. It will take your time, your energy, and your advice to push us forward when we're doing right, and to let us know when we're not. This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change....That's why I'm in this race. Not just to hold an office, but to gather with you to transform a nation."

3) Get your campaign to give you a printout of the names of the over 1.5 million people who have donated to your campaign (at an average of $197 each). Give that list a read every day; feel the heft. And remember that the tried-and-untrue swing voter strategy is what has led to the Democratic Party's prolonged identity crisis. Forget the fence sitters. Instead, continue to speak to those who have turned their backs on the electoral process--those who are struggling without health care, without decent schools, without jobs, without hope.

4) Tape to your mirror the poll results from July 2004, where Kerry was up by six, and June of 1988, where Dukakis was up by 15...and don't get complacent.

5) Go to YouTube and watch the concession speeches of Kerry, Gore, and Hillary Clinton, each of whom decided to run to the middle in an attempt to attract undecided swing voters

6) Don't let the daily petty squabbles of the campaign distract you from the core message that this campaign is not a referendum on John McCain's war record or the level of your patriotism--but rather on the future of America. Are we a nation driven by hope and promise or a nation driven by fear?

When Bobby Kennedy was agonizing over whether or not to run in 1968, he told one of his advisors: "People are selfish. But they can also be compassionate and generous, and they care about the country. But not when they feel threatened. That's why this is such a crucial time. We can go in either direction. But if we don't make a choice soon, it will be too late to turn things around. I think people are willing to make the right choice. But they need leadership. They're hungry for leadership."

Forty years later, we are starving for it. Real leadership, not a poll-driven facsimile. Not swing-state, swing-voter leadership. Leadership defined by an ability to capture our imagination and a willingness to challenge us. Leadership geared to transforming the country through the audacity of hope instead of keeping it mired in the politics of fear and division.

7) Heed the old Texas advice of Dandy Don Meredith and Molly Ivins: "You got to dance with them what brung you."

Voters longing for hope, inspiration, a new kind of politics, and fundamental change are "them that brung you" to the big dance. Don't let the pundits, the advisors, and the cowards convince you to let someone else cut in.

OUR BODIES, OUR SELVES

Gloria Steinem, do you weep
over the loss of Roe versus Wade?
Do your tears fall on the ashes
of burnt bras, the footprints
embedded into the many marches
women have made to find our rights?

Do the ghosts of the Suffrage fighters
revisit their cells, weeping, too,
for the loss of power our votes
have brought us after their days
suffering for the best for us all.

Do the MeToo women, so filled
with hope at the rally in Washington
search for their hiking shoes
to try once again to keep men's hands
and laws off of our bodies?

I add my own tears to the growing flood
that will one day wash us away
into the primordial pit of those
who have no hope of that rainbow
with bluebirds singing overhead.

– Pris Campbell, author of *Sea Trails*

EDUCATION

PUBLIC EDUCATION: "FAILURE BY DESIGN"

NOAM CHOMSKY

Public education is under attack around the world, and in response, student protests have recently been held in Britain, Canada, Chile, Taiwan and elsewhere.

California is also a battleground. *The Los Angeles Times* reports on another chapter in the campaign to destroy what had been the greatest public higher education system in the world: "California State University officials announced plans to freeze enrollment next spring at most campuses and to wait-list all applicants the following fall pending the outcome of a proposed tax initiative on the November ballot."

Similar defunding is under way nationwide. "In most states," *The New York Times* reports, "it is now tuition payments, not state appropriations, that cover most of the budget," so that "the era of affordable four-year public universities, heavily subsidized by the state, may be over."

Community colleges increasingly face similar prospects – and the shortfalls extend to grades K-12.

"There has been a shift from the belief that we as a nation benefit from higher education, to a belief that it's the people receiving the education who primarily benefit and so they should foot the bill," concludes Ronald G. Ehrenberg, a trustee of the State University system of New York and director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute.

A more accurate description, I think, is "Failure by Design," the title of a recent study by the Economic Policy Institute, which has long been a major source of reliable information and analysis on the state of the economy.

The EPI study reviews the consequences of the transformation of the economy a generation ago from domestic production to financialization and offshoring. By design; there have always been alternatives.

One primary justification for the design is what Nobel Laureate Joseph Stiglitz called the "religion" that "markets lead to efficient outcomes," which was recently dealt yet another crushing blow by the collapse of the housing bubble that was ignored on doctrinal grounds, triggering the current financial crisis.

Claims are also made about the alleged benefits of the radical expansion of financial institutions since the 1970s. A more convincing description was provided by Martin Wolf, senior economic correspondent for *The Financial Times*: "An out-of-control financial sector is eating out the modern market economy from inside, just as the larva of the spider wasp eats out the host in which it has been laid."

The EPI study observes that the "Failure by Design" is class-based. For the designers, it has been a stunning success, as revealed by the astonishing concentration of wealth in the top 1 percent, in fact the top 0.1 percent, while the majority has been reduced to virtual stagnation or decline.

In short, when they have the opportunity, "the Masters of Mankind" pursue their "vile maxim:" "…all for ourselves and nothing for other people," as Adam Smith explained long ago.

Mass public education is one of the great achievements of American society. It has had many dimensions. One purpose, for example, was to prepare independent farmers for life as wage laborers who would tolerate what they regarded as virtual slavery.

The coercive element did not pass without notice. Ralph Waldo Emerson observed that political leaders call for popular education because they fear that "This country is filling up with thousands and millions of voters, and you must educate them to keep them from our throats." But educated the right way: Limit their perspectives and understanding, discourage free and independent thought, and train them for obedience.

The "vile maxim" and its implementation have regularly called forth resistance, which in turn evokes the same fears among the elite. Forty years ago there was deep concern that the population was breaking free of apathy and obedience.

At the liberal internationalist extreme, the Trilateral Commission – the nongovernmental policy group from which the Carter Administration was largely drawn – issued stern warnings in 1975 that there is too much democracy, in part due to the failures of the institutions responsible for "the indoctrination of the young." On the right, an important 1971 memorandum by Lewis Powell, directed to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the main business lobby, wailed that radicals were taking over

Mass public education is one of the great achievements of American society. It has had many dimensions. One purpose, for example, was to prepare independent farmers for life as wage laborers who would tolerate what they regarded as virtual slavery.

– Noam Chomsky

E D U C A T I O N

everything – universities, media, government, etc. – and called on the business community to use its economic power to reverse the attack on our prized way of life – which he knew well. As a lobbyist for the tobacco industry, he was quite familiar with the workings of the nanny state for the rich that he called "the free market."

Since then, many measures have been taken to restore discipline. One is the crusade for privatization – placing control in reliable hands.

Another is sharp increases in tuition, up nearly 600 percent since 1980. These produce a higher education system with "far more economic stratification than is true of any other country," according to Jane Wellman, former director of the Delta Cost Project, which monitors these issues. Tuition increases trap students into long-term debt and hence subordination to private power.

Justifications re offered on economic grounds,but are singularly unconvincing. In countries rich to poor, including Mexico next-door, tuition remains free or nominal. That was true as well in the United States itself when it was a much poorer country after World War II and huge numbers of students were able to enter college under the GI bill – a factor in uniquely high economic growth, even putting aside the significance in improving lives.

Another device is the corporatization of the universities. That has led to a dramatic increase in layers of administration, often professional instead of drawn from the faculty as before; and to imposition of a business culture of "efficiency" – an ideological notion, not just an economic one.

One illustration is the decision of state colleges to eliminate programs in nursing, engineering and computer science, because they are costly – and happen to be the professions where there is a labor shortage, as *The New York Times* reports. The decision harms the society but conforms to the business ideology of short-term gain without regard for human consequences, in accord with the "vile maxim."

Some of the most insidious effects are on teaching and monitoring. The Enlightenment ideal of education was captured in the image of education as laying down a string that students follow in their own ways, developing30 their creativity and independence of mind.

The alternative, to be rejected, is the image of pouring water into a vessel – and a very leaky one, as all of us know from experience. The latter approach includes teaching to test and other mechanisms that destroy students' interest and seek to fi t them into a mold, easily controlled. All too familiar today.

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IN APPRECIATION

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI: A POET FOR THE AGES

RICHARD MODIANO

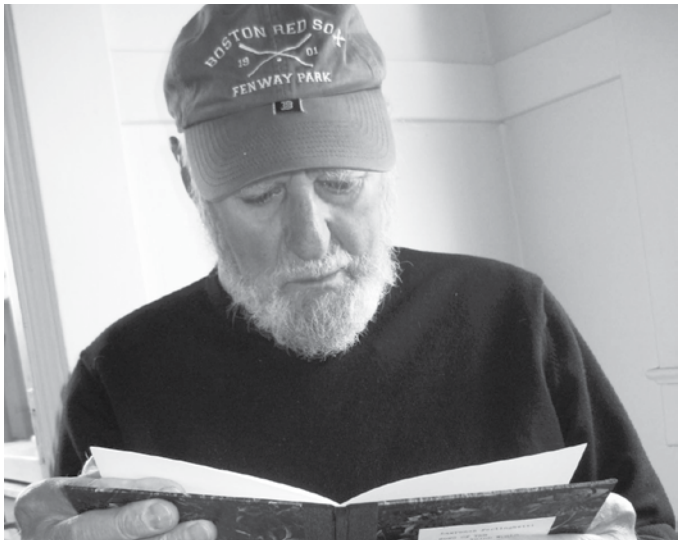


Photo by Soheyl Dahi

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was the kind of national poet laureate we really deserved but never officially got. Since he lived to the age of 101, it might occur to you that poetry and radical politics are good for your health. As a seminal figure of the international literary scene, Ferlinghetti's legacy is still going strong as are a number of other poets whom he published and championed, including Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Amiri Baraka, Daisy Zamora, Kamau Daood, Anne Waldman, and of course Allen Ginsberg. Ferlinghetti famously risked prison time for publishing Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* back in 1956 under the auspices of City Lights Books, an offshoot of the bookstore he and Peter Martin had launched a few years earlier, though the only person to spend time in jail was Shig Murao. Shig sold the offending volume to undercover San Francisco vice cops while Ferlinghetti was out of town.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of bookstores like City Lights and George Whitman's Shakespeare and Company in the 1950s. Shakespeare and Company opened in Paris around the time that Ferlinghetti was working on a PhD at the Sorbonne. After coming back to the United States, he decided to open a store with Peter Martin modeled on Whitman's, paying homage to it by putting up a sign, "Shakespeare and Company," just above "City Lights" and right above the front door. In the mid-50s, the paperback revolution was gathering strength and people like Ferlinghetti and Martin were in the vanguard, placing titles by New Directions and Grove Press on their shelves, as well as those of publishers even more on the cutting edge.

Many aspiring young poets and radicals made pilgrimages to City Lights to check out the latest books and magazines. They bought their Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Diane di Prima there, as well as Barney Rosset's *Evergreen Review*. Ferlinghetti stated emphatically that the Beat Generation provided the roots of both the 1960s radicalization and the counterculture. The Beats had a smaller audience, including only the most alienated teenagers throughout the nation who were ready to go on the road even if this meant dropping out of school.

...the Beat Generation provided the roots of both the 1960s radicalization and the counterculture.

– Richard Modiano

In less than a decade, hundreds of thousands would attend "be-ins" or peace demonstrations inspired by the same sentiments found in works such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*, a collection of poems that was likely to be found on any bookshelf next to works by Ginsberg, Kerouac, or Burroughs. Ferlinghetti explained that the book's title comes from a phrase found in Henry Miller's *Into the Night Life*. Miller, of course, was godfather to the Beat Generation just as the Beats were to the 60s radicals and hippies. The first page electrifies me as much as it did when I first read it around fifty years ago:

In Goya's greatest scenes
we seem to see
the people of the world
exactly at the moment when
they first attained the title of
'suffering humanity'
They writhe upon the page
in a veritable rage
of adversity
Heaped up
groaning with babies and bayonets
under cement skies
in an abstract landscape of blasted trees
bent statues bats wings and beaks
slippery gibbets
cadavers and carnivorous cocks and all the final hollering monsters

ABOUT BEYOND BAROQUE

Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center is one of the nation's most successful and influential grassroots incubators of literary art. Founded in 1968 and housed in the original Venice City Hall building in Venice, California, it is a nonprofit public space dedicated to cultivating new writing and expanding the public's knowledge of poetry, fiction, literature, and art through cultural events and community interaction. The Center offers a diverse variety of literary and arts programming, including readings, workshops, art exhibits, and education. The Center also houses a bookstore with the largest collection of new poetry books on the west side of Los Angeles; the Mike Kelley Gallery, which specializes in text and language-focused visual art; and a 50,000 volume archive of small press and limited-edition publications that chronicles the history of poetry movements in Los Angeles and beyond.

Few literary spaces have done more to cultivate innovative art from cultural outsiders, or to shape emerging artistic movements. Across five decades Beyond Baroque has nurtured the Venice Beats, cradled the Los Angeles punk scene, and provided crucial support to a series of seminal experimental writers and artists that include Dennis Cooper, Wanda Coleman, Mike Kelley, and Will Alexander.

Its legendary free workshops have profoundly shaped Los Angeles literature by helping to launch a number of influential careers, including those of Kate Braverman, Tom Waits, Leland Hickman, Bob Flanagan, Eloise Klein Healy, David Trinidad, Jim Krusoe, Exene Cervenka, Amy Gerstler, Paul Vangelisti, Michael Ondaatje, Harry Northup, Brendan Constantine, Jenny Factor, and Sarah Maclay.

Its reading and performance series have exposed L.A. audiences to some of the world's most notable writers and artists, often at early stages in their careers, including Allen Ginsberg, Amiri Baraka, Raymond Carver, X, Patti Smith, Viggo Mortensen, Paul Auster, Chris Kraus, Eileen Myles, Luis J. Rodriguez, Dana Gioia, Hector Tobar, David St. John, Robin Coste Lewis, and Maggie Nelson.

Today the Center continues to provide a vital cultural forum through its free workshops, reading series, youth programming, and artistic gatherings.

Beyond Baroque's Mission

Beyond Baroque's mission is to encourage the writing, reading, publication, dissemination, and preservation of contemporary literature through programming, education, archiving, and services in literature and the arts.

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of the
'imagination of disaster'
they are so bloody real
it is as if they really still existed

After graduating from high school in 1969, I made a road trip to San Francisco with another high school friend who owned a van. We didn't take the interstate but drove from Los Angeles on Highway 101. We didn't have to say it to each other, but we were sure we were reliving the Dean Moriarty-Sal Paradise experience in our own modest way. I considered living in San Francisco and writing poetry. This was at a time when the cruel realities of the job market had not yet forced young people down the maws of law or business school.

It was not, however, too soon for the crueler reality of the Vietnam War that made me hightail it to college and try for a draft deferment. It didn't take long for me to become a political as well as a cultural radical. I only wish that the political path I followed had been closer to Ferlinghetti's anarchism that was much more on native grounds, as Albert Kazin once put it.

Years later I would discover that people like Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth, whose anarchist Buddhist-oriented show on KPFA had influenced him, were members of a tradition that both preceded and lay outside the Marxist orthodoxy of the CPUSA variety. With the Bay Area serving as a long-standing hotbed for anarchism and pacifism, it is not a stretch to say that the "San Francisco Renaissance" strand of the Beat Generation was a critical link between the Beats and the 60s counterculture. Indeed, Lew Hill, the founder of the Pacifica Network, had spent time doing alternative service as a conscientious objector during WWII.

Ferlinghetti joined the navy before WWII and found himself part of numerous large-scale landing forces, including the one that arrived in Japan right after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Under conditions of non-existent security, he found his way to Nagasaki and was appalled by what he saw. Every building had been leveled to the ground and the severed limbs of the dead could be seen everywhere protruding from the rubble. From that moment on, he was a pacifist driven by the same sense of humanity that drew Howard Zinn to pacifism after seeing the destruction he had wrought as an air force bombardier.

I can honestly say that Lawrence made us what we are today.

Richard Modiano is a native of Los Angeles. From 2010 to 2019, he served as executive director of Beyond Baroque Literary/Arts Center. During that period he produced and curated hundreds of literary events. Richard is a rank-and-file member of the Industrial Workers of the World and the editor/publisher of the *Moon & Sun Review*. In 2019, he was elected vice president of the California State Poetry Society. [see *AMASS* issue 70 for a full-length interview with Richard.]

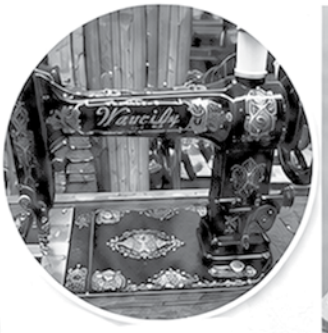


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JOHN O'KANE

Rome and the Vatican on my mind, I'm descending the stairs of my house for an early morning jaunt as a male appears to my left in the bike lane, a tune oozing from a curious device. I reach the bottom as he arrives directly in front of me, and I realize he's a dead ringer for the historical Jesus. He turns to me and says he's been wandering the streets, lost, searching for something. I try to find out what through the ethereal music which seems to illuminate him…form a feeble aureole around his head. It instantly vaporizes so I wonder if this was an effect of a flash of sunlight invading the whirling mist. He says that the music is from the *Bible and a Beat* channel on YouTube. Another tune percolates from his device, shifting to a different spiritual octave, and we lock gazes as he edges down the hill. I watch him descend, sylphlike, against the backdrop of the hazy mountain silhouette, tempted to chase after him. But the horizon appears to swallow him up.

The question of whether he disappears spritzes my sensorium, and I slap my face to get the semblance of an answer. None is forthcoming. Shadows pass over the house and the misting returns. I recline on the steps and commit this visual field to memory.

I recently published a novel—*The Accidental Jesus*—set here in San Pedro, St. Peter's town, which revolves around a former resident who returns for a high school reunion after a long absence. He resembles the historical Jesus. I'm wondering if there's a connection between this book and this vision. The accidental Jesus character and the story which conditions him have stewed in my conscious and subconscious minds for several years. Perhaps I transited fitfully from dream state to wakened vision, errant fragments from the former spilling into the latter, and this conjured an apparition!

I've been dreaming a lot lately, about Rome and especially the Vatican where I spent time some months ago when accepting a prize for my novel which was dedicated to Pope Francis. The details of my dreams tend to quickly vaporize. So maybe that morning my dream state extended for a short time, the substance so potent that it needed more space and time to mature.

A snippet from a psych class that's stuck with me about the dream state rushes me. The brain weaves emotionally charged experiences and older memories into creative stories. I wonder what experiences and memories sandwiched my dream state. What did I do recently that gave me an emotional charge?

Let's see. Yesterday I passed by that bar on 9th Street on the way to…the bank. Yes, the bank. A soused male stumbled out the door and nearly clipped me from the side, careening into a waste receptacle. Just another satisfied customer from a dive bar in a town known for this cultural jewel. His face haunted me momentarily. But I did my business at the bank and then moseyed up to Gaffey Street to visit someone. Several people were gathered on the corner, appearing to protest something, a helicopter hovering above. They were exchanging words with the honking cars streaming by. Humdrum incidents on another day in Mayberry RFD west. I can't imagine they would inspire an emotional charge. Wait, maybe this was a dream. I can't tell for sure.

Perhaps I transited fitfully from dream state to wakened vision, errant fragments from the former spilling into the latter, and this conjured an apparition!

– John O'Kane

It's hard to believe these situations and figures could somehow cross over the threshold between consciousness and subconsciousness and explode into a new mental configuration.

I couldn't recall anything that emotionally charging before this, so I re-ran the reel of yesterday's story. There is something about that male who cascaded from the bar. He doesn't exactly seem familiar. It's something about his…face. No, his head! It's completely bald. He has a beard, a goatee that's…how could I have suppressed this. It's a scraggly Vladimir Lenin, the domed figure who's an inconspicuous catalyst in the novel, the shadowy antagonist to the main character: the accidental Jesus.

I can't make out the figures in that protest or what they're shouting at the passing cars. But something's familiar about that corner. My mind was probably flush with the collision at the bar. Jesus something. Jesus! Is it that real-life group that usually hangs on Gaffey Street and proselytizes the second coming of Christ? They're a character in my novel as well, a "growth" that's obsessed with the accidental Jesus. It stalks him through the city, believing he's the second coming of Jesus Christ. This pressure over the course of several chapters climaxes when the growth

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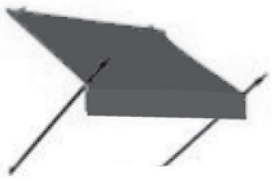
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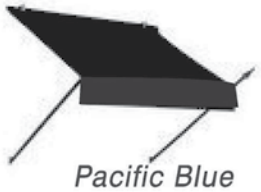
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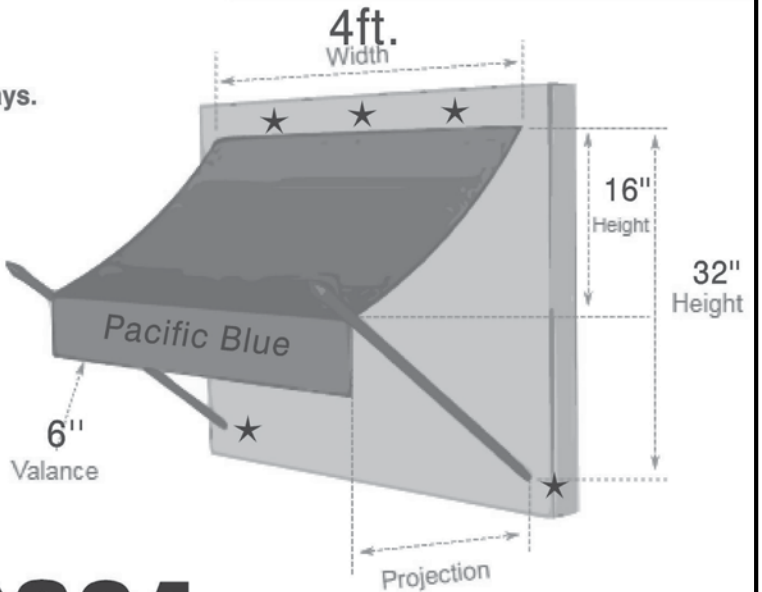
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captures him, carrying him to a mound in a park where he—now the "Jesus" he was assumed to be—speaks to God through a sermon. This is too much to contemplate. How could this incident have occurred right after the collision with the domed figure?

This had to be a dream. My day of reality was replaced by a previous dream I recollected! How could a previous dream invade my waking life as I concentrated on recalling what happened in it? I must be confusing dreams and reality. Wow! Am I having a breakdown? Losing my grasp on reality? This can't be…how could I prove it one way or another? I could be in a dream now, victimized by some cosmic snafu or colossal psychic or social reboot and searching for an exit stream. I slapped my face again and…

This must be the area. But the numbers don't seem to match. Hope what I'm seeing is really happening. I don't recall being in this part of Venice before. Maybe I crossed over the border into…wait! Did she say…she said Venice but…maybe it was next to Venice! Whenever I hear the word "Venice" I reach for my…for my what? Where was I going with that? The memories from this place! They flood in so fast I swoon…struggle to sort through the conflicting emotions. I can't be in a dream now. No more.

There, the sign. It's Marina del Rey! What a contrast to Venice with its architectural diversity and the feeling of living inside a work of art. This place seems to be a developer's dream, a hurriedly thrown together hint of Miami, a gridded testimony to temporary living. Blocks and blocks of mostly the same condos and apartments. What's a shrink doing in a place like this? Maybe I got the wrong referral. They said she's a super healer, a visionary shaman who can bridge the physical and spiritual worlds, enter altered states of consciousness to access unseen realms. That's quite a reference. I'm not sure these qualifications will be needed to figure out my meager mental miasma. On second thought, there might be a lot of alienated victims here. Good for biz.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Do you know where this address is?"

"Sure. You go down this street for about three blocks and turn left. It should be in the next block."
"Thank you!"

Pleasant so far. Just keep strolling along. It feels good to be moving. Maybe that's all the therapy I need! That looks like the street sign. This stretch of buildings seems a bit more interesting. And they're not far from the water.

Here we are. I don't think I've slipped back into a dream state. But how can I tell? Nice building. There she is on the third floor. Lorraine Mercury, Psycho-Spiritual and Existential Therapy. No intercom. Okay, last chance to change your mind. Is my mind capable of making that decision? I surrender to you, healer.
Not exactly who I expected. But then what do I know about…

"Welcome! You must be my 2 o'clock. Apologies for the messy place. I haven't had much time for domestic duties this week. Follow me into the studio."

"You know my name. What's yours?"

"Just call me…Alias."

"Okay. It's your…privilege!"

"Where's the couch, Doc?"

"I'm not a…Doc and…I don't do couch therapy. That's the talkin' cure. Talk is necessary at the start, but action produces change. Plus, it assumes there are diseases and neuroses that can be eliminated to achieve a normal condition. Are you diseased or neurotic, Mr. Alias? Do you want to be normal?"

"To be perfectly honest, Ms. Mercury, I don't feel much of anything right now."

"Are you okay?"

"I…" Her eyes! They're like lasers scoping my mind. I can barely make out her physical presence.

"Have a seat in one of my chairs. They're specially constructed to keep you upright and intensely conscious and full of energy."

"It feels…let me see. I feel a bit hyper."

"That's in your mind. Does my presence make you nervous?"

"No, I don't feel nervous…exactly. I'm facing the…"

"Unknown?"

"Yeah, that's more like it."

"That's…I hate to use the word…normal. Does your sitting position make you feel stronger and more clear-headed?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe. I think I'm feeling more



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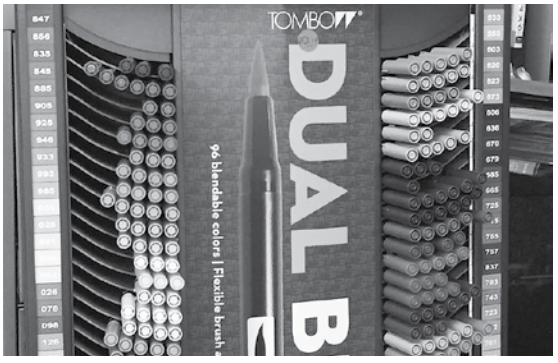




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awake."

"Good. This should continue if…have we met before? You seem familiar."

"I don't know. I'm having a hard time seeing you clearly. I don't think so. This lighting…it's bright and there's a hazy film between you and me."

"You must mean the bluish cast. It increases dopamine in your system…Helps keep you alert, sharpen your focus. Standard."

"I feel alert." I'm getting there but I still can't see her clearly. Her image seems to shift. I hope I'm not slipping back into a dream state.

"Did you have another name before "Alias"?

"I did."

"Okay. So, you said that you thought you were confusing dream and reality and needed someone to help you sort that out. Think you're in a dream now?"

"I'm not sure but…I might be." Her eyes! I still can't make out her physical appearance clearly. Her eyes seem to dart straight through the bluish haze into my mind.

"Do you have any idea when this started and what might've set this off?"

"Not for certain but I think it began one morning…early in the morning when I woke up abruptly from a dream which I quickly forgot and instantly exited my front door to descend my front steps. As I reached the bottom a male entered the area directly in front of me on the bike path. He turned and looked directly at me. He appeared to resemble the historical Jesus. We chatted briefly and he headed down the hill. He appeared to disappear into the horizon. I wasn't sure if he was real or if my dream had been extended. Since then, I've frequently felt I'm in a dream state when I'm doing normal, everyday things. I often have a hard time telling what state I'm in."

Why won't she speak? She seems perplexed.

"Are you a devoted Catholic? That could be the problem."

"No. I'm lapsed. I did publish a novel recently about someone who looks like Jesus. I did a lot of research for that. I can't think of any other reason."

"You might've secretly identified with that character…intuited some of its imagined qualities that lay dormant in your subconscious. You can't absorb them consciously and act them out—make them a permanent part of your personality—so they bust out periodically in visions. Maybe that's what happened that morning."

"Wow! Where did you get that after only a few minutes?"

"I'm an empath. You don't have a Catholic aura I guess would be the best word. But your eyes. They're Jesus-like. I've had clients who claim to be atheists, but they act and live like they believe in a higher power. Have you been hanging around Catholics lately?"

"No…not that I can recall. Well, I did get into the mind of the main character in developing the story."

"What's he like? Did you create him in your likeness trying to come to terms with your own religious mindset?"

"I see…I don't think I did. No, I'm mostly different from…"

"From?"

"I never looked at it that way."

"Don't authors usually leave part of themselves in their characters? Maybe the influences you imagined from writing the book shifted your sensibility…forced you to start un-lapsing yourself subconsciously."

Her penetrating eyes seem to be extracting insights from my subconscious through my eyes. Is she a sorceress? She's winning the duel. Her eyes are…more powerful in some mysterious way. I can only see…she's closing her eyes now, dipping her head slightly.

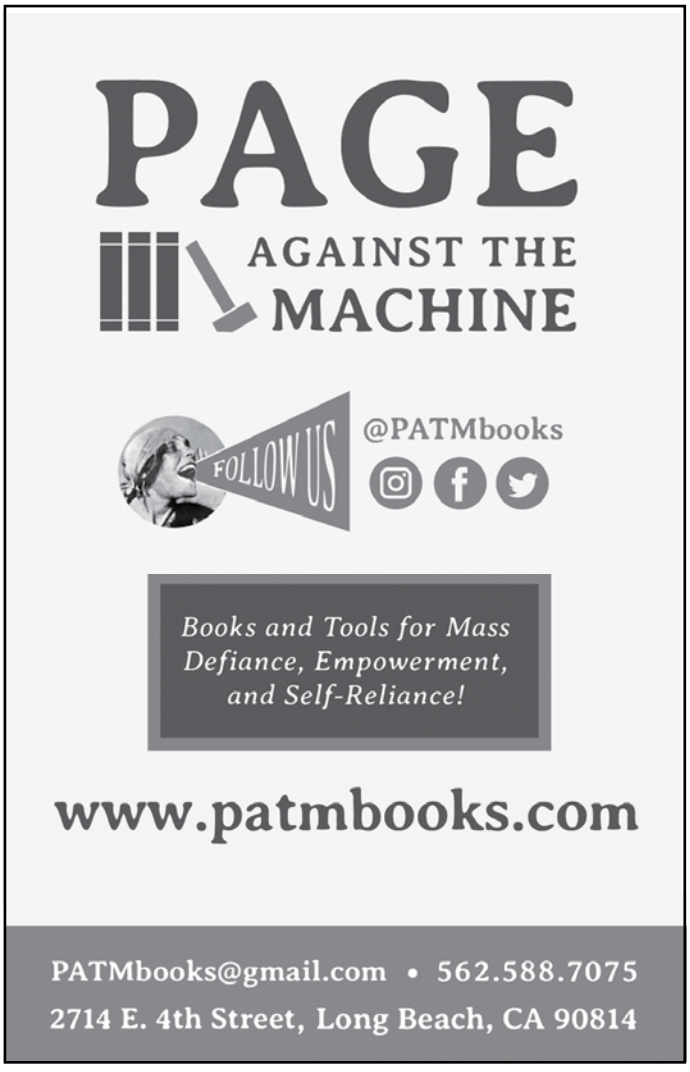
"Ms. Mercury, are you okay?"

I guess she needs a break. She must be challenged to keep up her energy. I should slip out now. I'm more confused than ever. This might be another dream state. I…she's opening them, bright-eyed as before.

"Sounds like you're conflicted. In this un-lapsing you might've begun to secretly identify with Catholics out of guilt.

Do you pray?"

"I haven't since I was…I can't really remember



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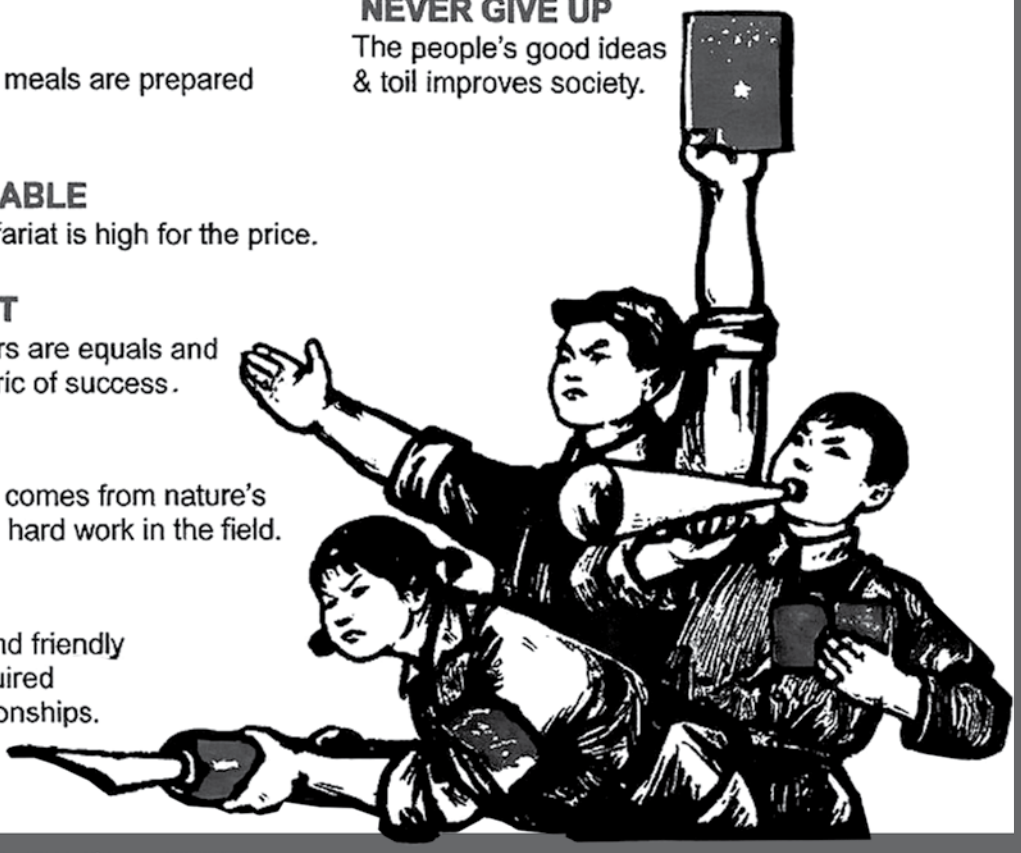
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when. I felt something when I was in Rome recently…in the Vatican. A spiritual charge of some kind. But I never actually prayed."

"Consciously, anyway. Maybe flecks of that spiritual charge broke free and metastasized into your subconscious and you started to silently lip sync primitive prayers. At that point praying could've developed a life of its own."

"You mean there could be something circulating in my head which has no symptoms?"

"Yes, like a virus ready to make you sick. Praying can damage you. Doing it means appealing to a person or image of power out of weakness…passivity. You become dependent on higher powers."

"You convinced me. I don't want to become a card-carrying Catholic."

"Maybe you already are. You were on the track to become one once the desire to deal with it in a book surfaced. Now you could be a victim, caught in a web of guilt feelings, seeing apparitions everywhere. Forever."

"Guilt? I don't think I…can you feel guilt if you're…lapsed?"

"When you're lapsed, you're just no longer active. The passion has only been quarantined. Once in Catholicism's clutches, it's got you."

"That scares me. I don't want anything to be forever. I've always mostly lived in the moment, existentially."

"Stick with that. Living existentially creates an antidote for neuroses according to R. D. Laing. But try and get the prayer culture out of your head." Her eyes are brighter and more penetrating like there's been a power surge in her head. "Living within its clutches manufactures guilt. It leads to the need to pray but the more you pray the more guilt you feel. It's a vicious circle. You're forever trapped, doomed to persecuting reflections, hesitations, and missed opportunities."

"I think these issues are what made me lapse. I hope I can escape…my head. I just remembered… ever since that apparition, if that's what it was, I've been seeing some strange things. I'll be walking down the street and the image of a priest superimposes on an unfamiliar face then disappears. This has happened several times. Once I'm sure a priest was following me. I ran and ran and finally ditched him. Another time a friend of mine passed by me on the street wearing a nun's habit. I tried to engage her in conversation, but she vanished as quickly as she appeared. And frequently, ordinary objects like pens, doorknobs, and statues seem to disintegrate. Sometimes they start glowing. Other times it seems like they're trying to communicate with me."

"You're in danger. These are sure signs of guilt. You need to get out of this circuit as fast as possible. The only positive is that these can also indicate your consciousness might be developing. You might become more aware of your existence."

"How do you know so much about Catholics?"

"I've seen many different victims of Catholic indoctrination pass through my lair, casualties of a wrong-headed metaphysics, sheep flailing for redemption from their preordained moralities…release from their guilt-ridden bondage."

"You see me as one of these victims?"

"The symptoms you've given me suggest you might be on a slippery slope. If you don't check this drift, you might soon be headed for the seminary. It might be

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marinating in your subconscious."

"I have no interest in any of that. I reject it all."

"You may not be able to stop it. Once they get their designs into your head you can easily flip, convert to full faith. A convergence of circumstances and a rush of passion might groom you for the messiah."

"I don't…is there hope for me?""

"You need to act quick to find out how deeply these designs have penetrated your mind. If they haven't yet, then you need to create a buffer so they never will. I do this through meditation. Learning to meditate gives you the power to control your spiritual life. You act to realize yourself…break your dependency on God-surrogates and higher beings."

"Isn't that escapism? You get lost in a sleepy state and stop thinking?"

"It's the opposite. When you meditate you alter your breathing and become more relaxed. This activates energy dormant within the body which rises through your spinal column and clears blocked pathways. Your consciousness expands and gives you access to your divine nature. The body is a temple. Its energy and pleasures open a path to the divine, to a God union. Not the institutional God…the God beyond God."

"This will allow me to separate dream from reality?"

"Yes. You'll be able to see and think more clearly…cut through the clutter of false appearances…cancel the moral code that creates guilt and commit yourself to wholesome choices without hesitation."

"I can do this by just breathing different and relaxing?"

"Not exactly. But your breathing must start to change. Do you have a tingling sensation in your back…your spine?"

"I'm feeling something. How did you do this?"

"Your chair. It's conformed to make you involuntarily meditate."

Where am I? This room…there's barely any light. Only one small window but it's covered. Looks like a storage space. I wonder how long I've been here. Where's my healer?! The last thing I remember my body was feeling funny. The chair…yeah, the chair. What did she say about…I can't…Just this tingly feeling in my back. My spine, that was it. And I began to see…not better but differently. I wonder what happened after that. I feel strong…renewed now. But what am I doing on this cot and in this room?

"Well, you've come back to life!"

"I was dead?"

"No, not literally. Though for a moment I wasn't so sure. You passed out as we were about to finish. Typical for the first session." The shadows…I can't see her eyes.

"Why am I in this room?"

"It's the recovery room."

"How long have I been here?"

"Only a few hours. You should get up now and start moving around. Get the circulation flowing again."

"I feel revived. What did you do to my body?" I wish she would turn so I could see her eyes.

"It's your mind. Your mind and body are now mated in a more productive relationship. Your consciousness is synergized. Let's go back to the studio. It looks like your gait and posture have improved. Even your color is more natural."

"Are you going to put me back in that chair?"

"No, sit here on the sofa." The eyes! They're like before. Very bright. But now they're pulsing in rhythm. But to what? I can't look directly into them.

"Do you remember what you saw?"

"No, not really."

"What you saw will eventually surface at random moments. You will gradually adjust to a new way of seeing."

"I don't think I saw Jesus."

"It wouldn't be the conventional one. Why can't you look at me now?"

"Your eyes seem more powerful now…more penetrating."

"It's probably the different lighting, or maybe your eyes are oversensitive from the session."

"They seem almost inhuman."

"All too human. From Nietzsche, one of my favorite muses."

"I'm not sure. I just hope my dreams don't invade my everyday life anymore and I'm free from the urge to pray."

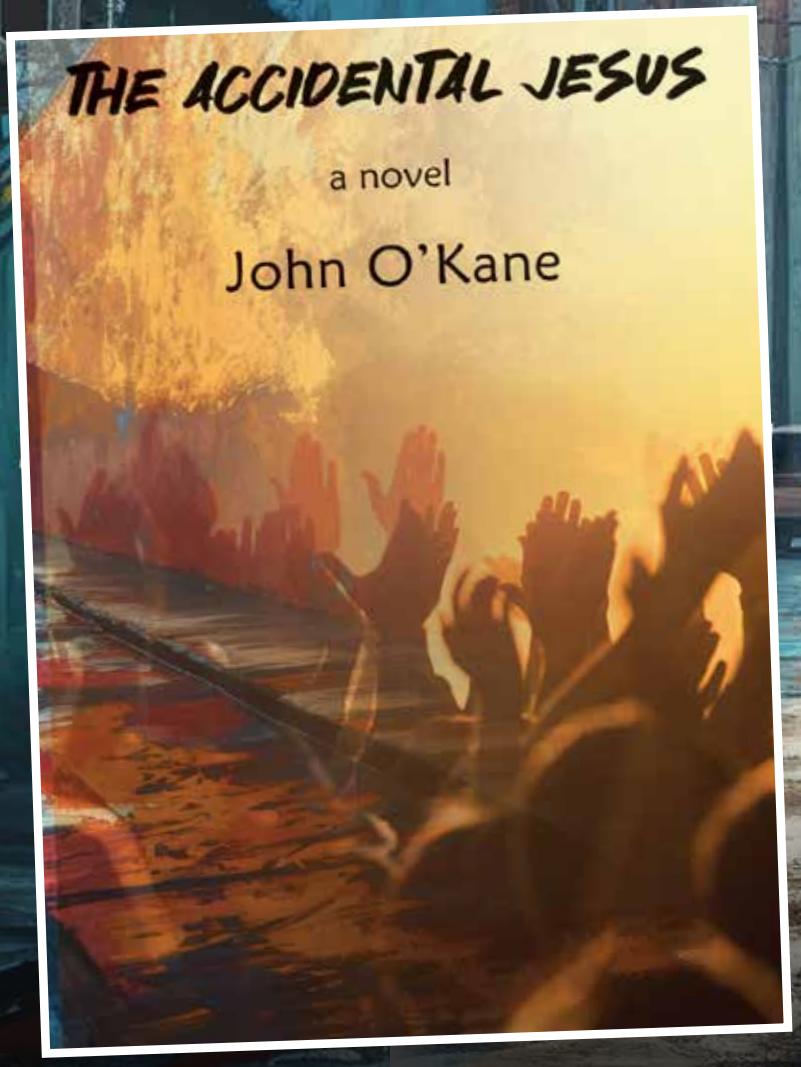
"We'll see. When you get back to your place get a good night's sleep. Get up at the same time you did when you first saw that Jesus figure and wait on the stoop. Do that every day at the same time and see what happens. I've programmed you to meditate when religious images, figures, or apparitions appear in your visual field in any form, especially of the historical Jesus. Your consciousness will shift and cancel the logic of prayer. You will have the power to observe and order your thoughts toward truth. You will break your subconscious dependency on a Christian God.

"I…I'll try. What…what are you doing with your eyes?!"

Well, here I am. Same time. The mist is even



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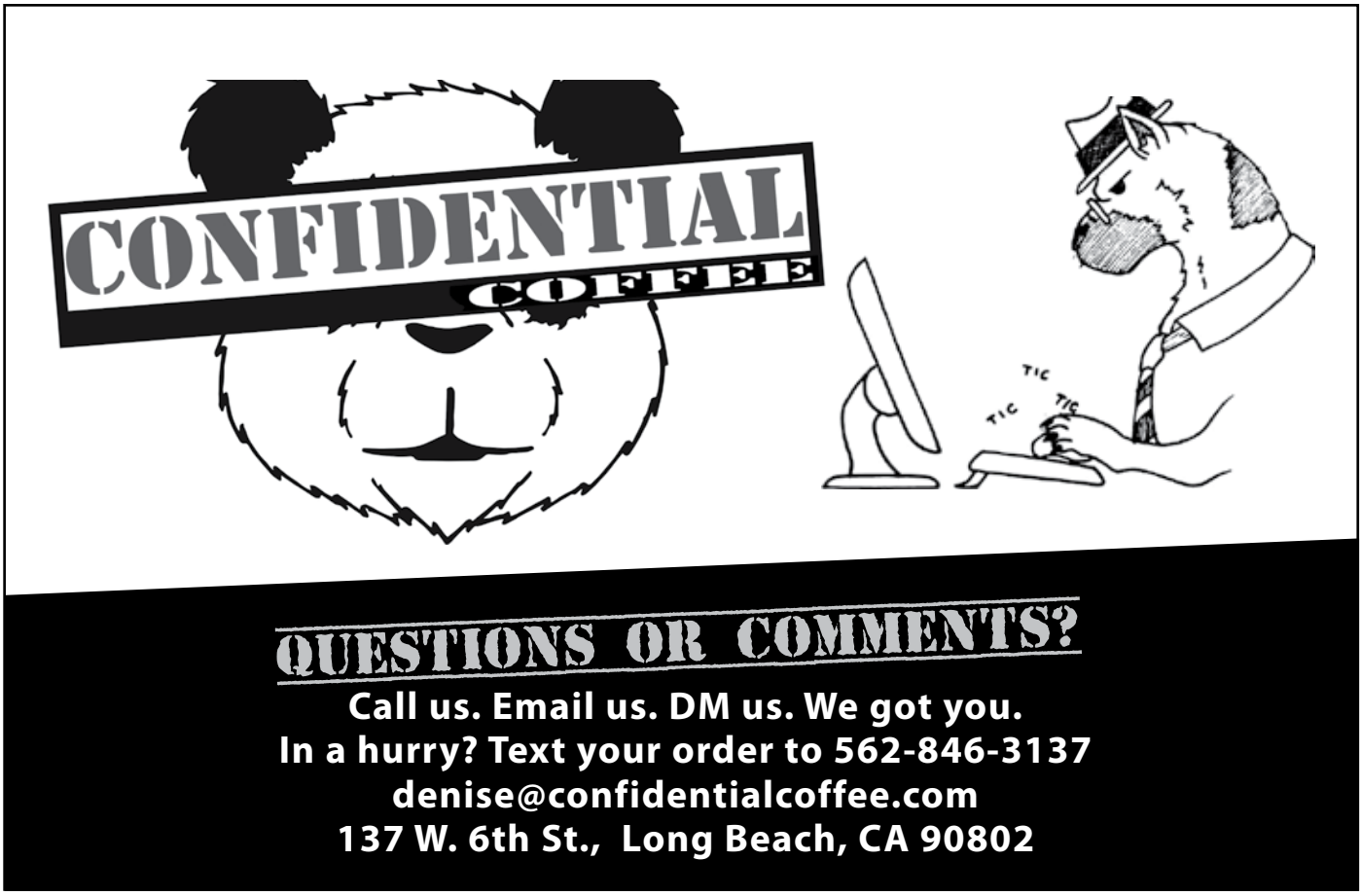
swirling. No people about yet. Not even much traffic. Hope Ms. Mercury's guidance—her programming—works. I don't want to look forward to endless mornings making a spectacle of myself for my neighbors. Guess she probly had in mind that it would only happen early. I hope my lingering impressions about that session won't clutter up my potential visitation. Maybe they come with the programming. Maybe she comes with it. Maybe that's what she meant by the programming of my mind. She could be a censor or even a muse. Have I formed a pact, a Faustian bargain, that will leave me with a debt I can't repay? I don't have much of value to trade. I'm not afraid of losing my soul since I'm not sure I have one. I hope this is not a self-defeating bargain. Anyway, I need help so…

There…looks like my…visitor in the shadows between those bushes across the street. He's coming this…no…no! That's that hippie on his circuit through the neighborhood rummaging through the waste receptacles. A little early today. Ah, hippies…and the historical Jesus looked like a hippie! Couldn't be. Have I slipped back into a dream state? There's a wave from Mimi. Guess she's back a little late from her gig at Paradise Island. I must be awake. Well, doesn't look like anything's happening this morning.

Okay. Same time, new day. Conditions are about the same. That time of year when mist and fog drapes St. Pete's town. A perfect storm for spawning illusions. No hippies in evidence. An endangered species here anyway. Finally, a human presence. Jeremy is taking his leprous dog out for a walk. I wish he would get rid of… look who popped out of that RV. The mysterious woman who sometimes looks like the Madonna and other times like Mary Magdalene. Strange, she doesn't look exactly like either one now. She's been parked there for several weeks. I wonder what she finds interesting about our neighborhood. She's chatting with Jeremy and now she's inviting him into the RV. The more I think about it, the historical Jesus would've surely felt at home in this neighborhood. Maybe that's why he or his replica appeared in front of my house. But, on the other hand, maybe he or the replica was targeting the hood and not me specifically. One or the other could've combusted as I happened to exit my house.

Looks like another dud. I'm not even getting a micro-buzz yet. Maybe I should call Ms. Mercury.

Hopefully the third time is a charm. The mist is lighter, but the fog is thicker. Otherwise, another morning on the stoop. Ah, the first activity of the day. Mrs. Grigorian is exiting to water her plants. I haven't seen her for a while. Bless her, she's giving some spare change to the bedroll in her driveway. Jesus, or your likeness, where are you? If they're eventually a no-show, then perhaps this will prove that my original experience was a fluke of sorts, an optical illusion and not a real apparition. But how long will I have to wait before… That sound. It's a copter staccatoing above the steeple of the Catholic church. Why is it hovering there? Now it's heading toward the neighborhood. What's it doing around here…and this early in the morning? I haven't



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seen a copter for months in this neighborhood. It's starting to circle over the area around my house. The pilot seems to be looking for someone. It seemed for a moment his eyes were peeled on me, but now he's scoping the ravine across the way. Wonder what it's searching? Now it's racing back to the church. The bells…the bells are ringing as it hovers over the steeple. Do I want this? Am I conjuring it? This feels like a sudden invasion.

The door of the RV is opening. It's…this time it's certainly Magdalene, but she's draped in loose-fitting sweatpants. What is she doing? That object she's… It resembles the Buddha. It looks like she placed it on top of a hibachi. She appears to be bowing to something. A very odd-looking contortion. This is too much. A copter and a statue that appears to be the Buddha, a hibachi thrown in…these are in the novel too. This could mean that I've momentarily slipped into a dream state again. Help, Ms. Mercury!

Another slap in the face! I guess I'm back. Where was I? I've gotta find out what Magdalene is doing. But as I rise from my stoop, something distracts me. It's a faint sound from off to my left up the hill that keeps getting stronger. I realize now that it's music, though I'm not sure what kind. I look at Magdalene, who now appears to be flailing some secret code, and hear the church bells tolling an Angelus prayer as the source of the music creeps down the hill toward me. It's a pickup with a large boombox belting out a shrill rock tune that drowns out the lyrics. I see a sign on the rear of the pickup as it passes. It says "Jesus Freak!"

These different sounds linger and fertilize, leaving a sound that seems free of each. The chant of the Angelus tempers the rockin' gospel sound, and as the pickup edges down the street it fades into a celestial country beat that soothes and inspires me. I glance at Magdalene, who appears unsettled by the cacophony, and fall back on the stoop, wondering how these events happened at the same time. It must be coincidental, but why do I feel like I'm controlling this? Where did I suddenly get the desire to make this meaningful.

The mist has evaporated and the fog is lifting. Magdalene has apparently concluded her… She doesn't look the same! What happened to her face, her hair? I want to race after her and my mind feels like thought waves of energy are undulating through it. But I can't respond to them. I still haven't seen my historical Jesus. I see…I've never seen the neighborhood like this. Everything seems closer and…brighter. Now they're further away. This movement captures me. There… the status quo restored! But now it's brighter than ever. And objects are hyper-clear. I can't make out the shapes exiting their houses or the ones now appearing in the street. From one person's get-up it seems like a spare-change-seeker is coming toward me. But the face is missing. I palm the figure to come closer, but it scampers away. It's too much to process. I can't focus on one specific thing. My senses are overloading.

Now something seems to be pulling me back into myself. I can hear myself breathing. A lovely sound! Now my body…it's making some strange sounds. They seem to be in rhythm with my breathing. Now both are fading. I feel like I'm floating. The neighborhood seems more peaceful now. It must be a different time. Is this a flash from the past or a vision of the future? There's something in the air. If I can only make it visible! I sense it wants to be freed. What will release it? A faint garbling sound lilts the surrounding space as a Moebius Strip twirls in front of me. It gradually expands and then morphs into a spread of wide-open space dotted with stars and planets. It's stretching now and I feel like I'm zooming ever faster through deep space toward infinity. I don't want it to stop. I wanna see what's at the end of this mysterious journey. But suddenly a mosaic of shadows and wavy lines and pulsating blotches absorb the space and I'm in a soundless void. Then I hear what sounds like an echo. It continues for several seconds and ruptures into a series of cryptic screeches that approximate language. Am I getting a message from…from who or what? A spirit? Some alien force that…

I wake up drenched in sweat on the sidewalk, wondering where Jesus is. I rush to grab my cell.

"Hello, is it you, Ms. Mercury?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"It's Alias."

"Alias? What happened? How did it go? Did you find Jesus?"

"No…I didn't. I'm free. I've been meditated through a cosmic odyssey and I'll never pray again!"

John O'Kane is the publisher of *AMASS Magazine* and the author of the forthcoming book, *Jukebox Confessionals*.



Several years ago, the editors of *AMASS* decided that the time was ripe to feature a cartoon with each issue. Enter social-observer-extraordinaire Richard Vaughn. Enjoy these five from past issues.

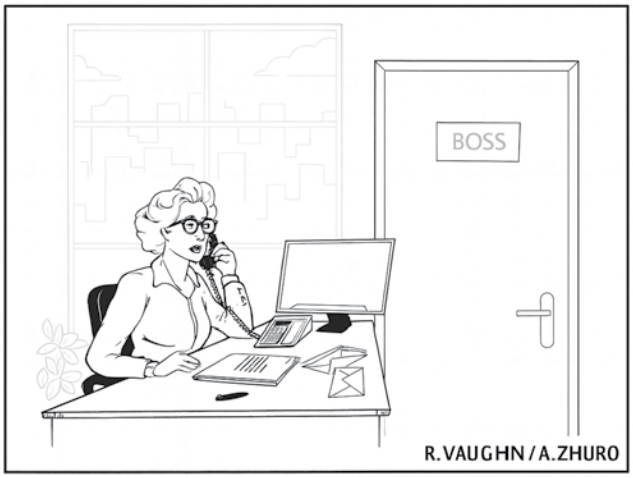
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



R. Vaughn/A.Zhuro

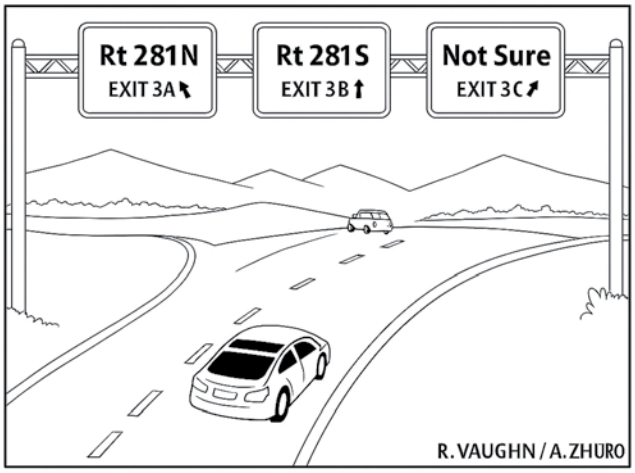
You can contemplate your mortality.
Or you can turn the page.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



"I'm sorry, but Mr. Benson is busy expanding his work to fit the time allotted."

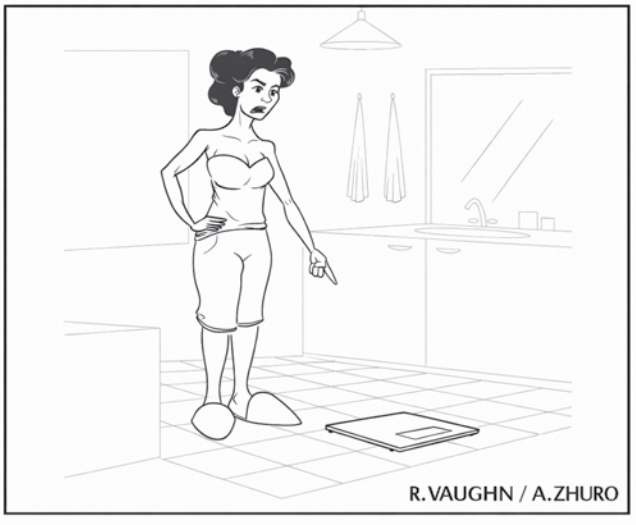
THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO VAUGHN



"I don't care what you say – I'm SKINNY!"

MENTAL HEALTH: STEPPING OUTSIDE THE BOX

LISA ROBINS

I'm acquainted with mental illness…intimately.

I've personally miraculously escaped its vicious clutches, suffering merely from chronic indecision, mood swings (generally based on situational forces), or occasional light depression felt strongly in my body—in my chest and heart—along with an overall sense of heaviness, overwhelm, or sadness. Overall, I'm quite functional in my life and able to interact with my community.

However, both of my biological parents suffered from it greatly. My mom: depression; my dad: bi-polar disorder. Contradictory moods…clashing. After a brief marriage, they split. When they remarried, their illness slammed their respective firstborns.

My mother and stepfather's eldest son—six years younger than me—suffered from schizoid affective disorder (at least that was his diagnosis at the time). A mighty struggle ensued after its onset (at around age 18). He died by suicide on the eve of his 27th birthday. The younger of my half brothers from my mom is a successful and healthy U.C. Davis personality psychology research professor, married to a lovely wife (also a psychology professor), whose son who recently began college at UCLA.

The eldest of my two half sisters from my father and stepmother—nine years younger than me—suffers greatly from bipolar disorder (Axis I, rapid cycling, mixed-state, treatment-resistant). That's her official diagnosis, mixed with God knows what else (it's hard to tell where the illness stops and personality begins). Occasionally, we see the charismatic, brilliant person beneath the illness, but she's usually angry and blaming others, or weeping uncontrollably and begging for help. My younger half sister from my dad mirrors my younger half brother's success. Married, with a loving husband and son, she works as a social worker.

As for me, I never managed to have a romantic life partner, but I'm one helluva single mom. And although I'm no celebrity, I've been a working actor for almost fifty years (paid or not). Despite my inability to have it all…I'm grateful. As one of my close friends said, it's amazing that I can get out of bed and tie my shoes given where I've come from.

What sets some of us apart and allows us to survive, while others fall through the cracks? What can we do about "treatment resistant" mental health issues? What can we as a society do to help?

First of all, we need to be willing to talk about it. I do a solo play about my brother. It chronicles my growing awareness after his death of how ill he was—I thought he was simply troubled—and my own imperfect recovery from his choice to jump off a bridge, along with my effort to speak out by transforming the event into theatre. Whenever I mention the subject matter, I almost always get the same response…in a whisper: My father/brother/best friend, etc. did that. Or my father/brother/best friend is crazy, too. Let's eliminate the taboo.

Let's kick mental illness out of the closet and into community conversation!

– Lisa Robins

Secondly, we need to be aware of the scope of the issue. What constitutes CRAZY or MENTALLY ILL?

One thing must be acknowledged: We live in a society whose structure and rules are created and agreed upon by general consensus. Laws are created from that. Norms of behavior stem from the majority's agreement, i.e., it's all made up. The only thing that isn't defined by humans is eating, sleeping, the need for shelter, and procreation. What we wear, how we behave, and what we believe are agreed-upon stories. Some claim they know the truth. Good for them.

In my mind, there's an indescribable mystery of life ….and death. Religions and philosophies and governments grapple with that by creating rituals and rules.

- Be quiet in the library.
- If you go to church, you'll go to heaven… which is a lot better than this.
- If you do "the wrong thing," you go to hell.
- If you don't act "respectful" of those chosen to be in power, you go to jail or worse.
- If you don't believe in the agreed-upon rules, you're crazy.

Societies worldwide, meanwhile, contain huge income inequality. Simply put, people who are good at making money make a lot of money, while the rest need to work ridiculous hours simply to have food, shelter, and healthcare. That can drive some "crazy."

Here are some of the many categories of "mental illness":

1) The truly "mentally ill," those diagnosed with illnesses such as depression and various forms of schizophrenia causing mental anguish. Courageous writers have attempted to convey the pain of these invisible ailments. In his memoir, *Darkness Visible*, William Styron describes his depression as "a howling tempest, better envisioned as a violent weather event in the mind rather than ordinary sadness," and "a diabolical discomfort—physical and mental agony akin to suffocation or being trapped in a burning prison room with no escape." Sylvia Plath poetically describes her depression in *The Bell Jar* as being trapped under the jar in a state of being cut off from the fresh air of the normal world and forced to breathe one's own stale despair. The only way I can even begin to comprehend their pain is to physicalize it. What if I had an excruciating toothache every single day for ten years?

2) Drug addicts with brains addled by self-medicating.

3) Those exhausted from trying to keep up with what's expected of them (like the kid in Thailand who murdered his strict grandmother who wanted him to "excel").

4) People who are ashamed to not be able to keep up with their "lifestyle" (like those jumping out of buildings during the stock market crash of the 1920s or get-rich Ponzi schemes).

5) Rebels who don't buy the "party line"—artists, free thinkers, etc.

Then there's the issue of overlapping causality or personality vs. situation.

For example, a 16-year-old kid gets kicked out for being gay or trans. Homeless, they get addicted to drugs from depression and to cope with street life…then they begin to act in an antisocial manner. Who's mentally ill in this situation? The parents? The kid forced to live on the street? Some (not me!) would say the kid was mentally ill in the first place for being outside what their parents deem "normal."

Or a kid unable to sit still in school is forced to take medication before trying alternative ways of learning.

Or a bipolar person gets arrested for anti-social behavior. They resist all efforts to help. Due to paranoia? Or perhaps holding onto their tiny shred of autonomy over their own life.

Where does the illness stop and the personality begin?

When do society's needs outweigh a person's rights?

When should society help people against their wishes who can't help themselves?

Each category listed above has different causes, but the result is the same: human beings unable to function in our current society. So what do we do with these troubled people?

Mental illness of any kind is a bugaboo. Even for the highly functional, it can be a hidden killer. Witness the death by suicide of those who appear to "have it all," like Anthony Bourdain or Kate Spade.

The latest cutting-edge treatments are often ineffectual. Playing "Drug Cocktail Musical Chairs," psychiatrists switch medications and dosages.

The problem is they're just treating groups of symptoms. They just don't know. I'm not anti-science or anti-drug treatment, but we need more modalities.

Those with money can enter a cushy rehab or mental health treatment center. There are some beautiful facilities I'm just learning about which give me hope.

Money doesn't cure all, but it does give a better chance to those who have it. Those without are relegated to state institutions, which, however well-meaning, are sorely lacking. They generally overmedicate to keep patients from "acting out." We need an alternative.

I say let them "act out," but in a controlled environment. I have a dream, and it looks like a funny farm!

Yeah, you heard me, a good old-fashioned funny farm.

No, let's make that a "Fun Farm."

It's outside of the expensive part of the city, maybe a couple square miles away. I see different levels of care on this Fun Farm. Maybe in the center there's higher security for those who might cause harm to themselves or others. The staff is highly trained to care and inspire, keeping those individuals as well as the neighboring communities safe. "Treatment resistant" residents previously on medication meant only to sedate would have space and programs such as art, music, and theatre to engage their unique talents.

Encircling that core could be space for those who just need a rest and a withdrawal from the rat race. Lots of good old-fashioned nature, with nooks in which to read and write poetry or songs or whatever their soul needs. Farm areas for growing edible crops. Craft areas to create or build.

Everybody's freaked out by AI taking all the jobs. But have they tried to get a loved one into a psychiatric hospital? Are they aware how few beds are available? How few services? Have they tried to find mental health care for a loved one outside a hospital? Or a therapist who doesn't cost a fortune? What if AI frees workers from other industries to meet the huge demand for facilities and human workers in the mental health sector?

I believe the biggest problem in the world right now is mental illness. This may be overly simplistic, but I believe it's causing terrorism and suicide bombers. I believe those people don't have much to live for so they don't care about killing themselves and others. There's no reason in this day and age with automation and AI that people need to work ten or twelve hours a day for a roof over their head and food for their families. Let's have a heart and create alternative lifestyles.

While we're at it, why don't we make these communities create something of value to give back to societies outside of their communities. I'm not sure what that would be, but perhaps…perhaps clothing,

imaginative furniture, stories, music, theatre?

I envision a new reordering of society where those who suffer from "mental illness" can enjoy alternative lifestyles, not the lowest of the low scrambling to function in a way in which they're unable to function.

You may say I'm a dreamer, but I may not be the only one. Countries like Norway have dreamt of this and apparently it works! They've turned our nightmare into a dream scenario for those suffering, and for those of us who are trying to help.

Let's find a way to fund our Fun Farms! There is plenty of money to go around to train people and create facilities to ease the pain and stigma of those suffering from mental illness. I call on billionaires such as Tom Steyer (who I believe has his heart in the right place) to fund such places as experiments. Let's make Nirvana communities, which can be models for other cities and countries.

The Fun Farm becomes a place people actually want to go. Let's make it so attractive that people on the streets suffering from drug addiction will *want* to go there. People suffering from mental health illnesses will hear about it and *want* to give it a try. People suffering from overwhelmed in our current structure of society will *want* to go to the Farm for a rest. People can even live there full-time if they like. Those suffering from any sort of mental anguish can heal, receive training, and help others.

I hope to continue to explore mental health solutions. I've uncovered questions I need to investigate, such as existing alternative treatment facilities in the U.S. and other parts of the world, voluntary vs. involuntary treatment, and funding.

Let's kick mental illness out of the closet and into community conversation!

A lifetime member of the Actors Studio, Lisa Robins has worked with such inspirational directors, writers, and performers as Mark Rydell, Paul Mazursky, Estelle Parsons, Lou Antonio, Martin Landau, Jenny Sullivan, and Bill Rausch. She's contributed to *The Free Venice Beachhead and AMASS*. Her acclaimed one-woman show, *Committed? A Ritual for Robbie*, has recently been staged in New York and Los Angeles.





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SUBLIMINAL SEDUCTION

JOHN O'KANE

Lili awakens in pained ecstasy perplexed by the surroundings. But as they start to fall into relief, she senses a presence in the room. She rises and patiently scopes the space but sees no one, wondering if someone might've been here while she was asleep. Do they check up on us during the night? Maybe I was just dreaming. When she tries to speak her words come out partially formed like something is forcing her to forge new words. She suspects someone else now occupies her body. These anxieties gradually fade as she lounges next to her top-floor bay window on the south side of the building, taking in the full stream of late morning.

She gazes beyond the rooftop at the beach, thinking how strange it is that she's in this room with this view of bodies dotting the sand, couples mating their minds in ecstasy, surfboards angling to shore. That inlet, that tree! A wave explodes over the lip of the sand into a creamy ooze, and she feels the tactile drench from this shower. When was it? I wish I could remember. Maybe if I went down there, I could… replenish myself. She rises and unfastens her bikini top, letting it drop to the floor, and heaves her chest toward the target, her palpitations ratcheting up and up until she gasps for breath and drops her head, closing her eyes in a coda. When she reopens them, she sees two smudged, whitish specks pulse in her direction from the first floor, their owner shielded by shadows dancing across the side of the building. As they lift, she's lasered by a set of penetrating saucers and thrusts her torso backward, now able to glimpse their owner. The shadows return before she can identify who it is, suspecting it's likely that crazy guy who kept staring at her yesterday. Why do they let people like that in here, she wonders. I hope they keep him away. He didn't even know my name.

I'm not gonna think about people like that anymore…I'm only interested in positive things and… being around healthy people. This latter thought sends her to the center of the room, where she promptly begins her exercise routine. Since attending the fitness classes not long after her arrival, she's committed herself to a rigorous workout schedule, hoping to retrieve some version of her younger self. The instructors and residents of HOME have been such an inspiration. They've given her a new sense of purpose, made her feel like she's been born again into some new secular religion. But as she pulls her arms up from touching her toes, she freezes and blinks repeatedly like some pressing concern has flooded her mind. She straightens up, ceasing her workout, and hustles to the bathroom.

"Attention, everyone. We hope you like our new meal plan. We've made some changes to make all of you healthier. If you have experienced negative symptoms from this change go, to the clinic and the staff will assist you."

Stepping in front of the mirror, she tries to see herself clearly, as she is, shorn of cosmetic camouflage, but gets only flashes from a gallery of uncanny faces. The image before her becomes increasingly generalized like it could be merely an eco-sketch ready for definition. And the longer she looks the less she's convinced it's her. Is she being reduced to a type? Maybe her physical routine and new diet have reaped more results than she expected and she's becoming a younger and healthier version of herself that strangely resembles the appearance of many others. She prides herself on having a youthful face with barely any scars of aging. Her breasts now appear firmer and fuller, and as she drops her bikini bottom notices that the skin around her stomach and waist seems tauter. There are fewer lines on her neck, her hips seem narrower, and her nose appears thinner and shapelier. These are changes to die for, but she winces, glances at the vial of pills on the nearby table, reneges, then ponders herself from another angle as she succumbs to flashes from some unknown source. Her face is now even more unrecognizable, its components appearing to distort, even melt, before her glance. The nose expands and a red streak runs down across her lips. Someone who she can't identify is speaking to her, telling her to take a deep breath. She's feeling sick, afraid she might vomit, even die. The speaker says she'll get used to it and it will help her dance better, do a lot of things better. She'll take charge of her life and be on top of the world…become a superwoman.

Where in my mind did that explode from, she wonders while stretching a glance toward the door. Have the memories of someone passing in the hall invaded her head? She shuffles to the door and opens it but sees no one. I remember that voice from somewhere, she reflects on her way back inside. Superwoman! Who called me…

There's a whole patch of time back there I can't recall, and it seems to be getting bigger and bigger but… voices have been bursting into my head recently.

– John O'Kane


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that? Where was it? Dancing? When? When was my nose…like that? She returns to the mirror and stares at it, hoping this renewed concentration will bring back the flashes. But now it seems like her face has dropped slightly, so she plucks a jar from the nearby table and anxiously spreads the creamy contents over it, kneading it deeper and deeper with her fingers. The result somehow makes her look clownish and older. She watches her skin absorb the whiteness, hoping her real face will return, but it remains a chalky arabesque. Her nose now starts bleeding on the left side, and she screams, snuffing it almost immediately so no one will hear. She grabs a cotton ball from the table and swabs the area, but the red continues streaming from her nose and, strangely, the ball remains pure white. Tossing it aside in a panicky gesture, she presses her face closer to the glass and squints, now feeling this image has nothing to do with her. But the blood is still flowing onto her lip. Screaming again, this time longer, she vaults backward from the mirror onto the sofa and curls up in a fetal position, straightening out in pace with an increasing drowsiness until her head becomes still on the pillow.

She stirs, jerks her head back and forth repeatedly, and mumbles. The mumbling becomes louder, reaches a crescendo, and ceases as her head settles. But her expression contorts like she's still in pain. Trying to get her speech back, she springs up and peers into space, expecting to see something, someone. Disappointed, she returns to the mirror, takes a deep breath, and inspects her visage again. She clasps her head like she's trying hard to concentrate, recover something she'd been thinking about or perhaps cull the flashes from her short time under. But it becomes a blur, revealing a dark platform erratically exposed by flashing lights, bars suspended in the air, body parts dancing in rhythm to music she hasn't heard for a long time. The bars become the slats of a rocking cradle, the head of a child caught between two of them, the body parts hovering over the child. Another voice breaks through, possibly the same one as before, saying she has nothing to worry about, that she just needs to be herself and everything will come to her.

Who was that…and who was that…child? Was that…in my head or…did someone or something put it there? She clasps her head again like she believes another stretch of intense concentration will vaporize these images, these words, as the screen brightens on the far wall. She wonders if she mistakenly touched the remote but sees it on the corner of the end table beyond her reach.

The screen floods with pictures of an exercise routine, one she's never seen before. A bikini-clad, tall blonde with a model's body is leading a group of fifteen males and females who are stretching and gyrating to the repetitive rhythms filling the room, sounds she seems to recall from her time under. The model turns toward the camera and winks like she's confirming an in-joke with the operator. It makes Lili feel like she's looking directly at her. In the lingering few seconds before she pivots back to her flock, Lili gets a clear look at her. She seems familiar. The music keeps looping, and she sees now that the group, which is performing like parts in a machine, is composed of varying ages. Some seem barely out of their teens and others are nearer her age. The woman now breaks from the exercise routine and performs a flourish of popular dance quotes, zoned into herself. The others slowly mimic her movements and convert them into their own idioms, some becoming quite suggestive. The music changes accordingly to a form of experimental jazz which conjures pleasing memories for her, the vibrations sending the equivalent of electric charges into her body. She gets up and presses her hands on the screen, hoping to intensify and preserve the charge, her mind willing the group to pass through all the electronic spaghetti and swoop her into the performance. The group approaches a oneness, a synchronicity of physical gesturing, and the woman strips naked while continuing to improvise ever more erotic movements. Each member of the group follows her lead as she approaches one after the other and hugs them. The others do the same, and the group become a ball of flesh gyrating with the music, now resembling a jazzy disco beat. The picture cuts off and Lili reaches for the remote, trying frantically to get it back. She notices the cord to the set is connected.

Frustrated, she teeters back onto the sofa and stares at the black screen like it's sending her a coded message. She rushes to the mirror and peeks at the results, fearful of what she might see, and twitches, then retreats a few feet and rustles her frame to test the mirror's veracity, inspecting every detail. Smiling with apparent satisfaction, she unexpectedly belches a scream, bolts to the bathroom, and locks the door.

"Attention, everyone. We apologize for the disturbance on the second floor in the north wing. A member has unfortunately had an adverse reaction to one of our new drugs."

She opens the warm shower spigot all the way, steps out of the cubicle, and slides the door shut, watching the steam seep through the cracks. Dropping onto the stool she feels her skin absorbing the beads of moisture and lays her head back on the tank, relaxing her legs around the oval. The compounding of dampness from the steam makes her feel heavy. Lying there she becomes aware of a curious odor, like all that moisture sloshing around her innards is basting the raw flesh and organs and a steamy soup is secreting through her pores, flushing away her impurities. The images from the screen and the reflections from her subconscious plunge now become more palpable, like maybe the escaping steam is a catalyst delivering an unintended bonus, a kind of mind-flush of the emotions.

Spreading her quaking thighs further apart, she loses consciousness, waking several minutes later to a room engulfed in steam. She rises and opens the bathroom door, letting the space clear, and enters the shower. Readjusting the water temperature, she submits to a marathon cleansing.

Now rejuvenated, her back flat against the

exterior wall of her room in the lotus position, she opens her eyes to the sun streaming from the east, the squalls of dampness fending for their lives. Feeling a bit remote, she swivels to her left toward a familiar stretch of beach which now appears like a grainy stretch of fantasy, devoid of bodies. She shakes her head and rises flush against the glass, squinting at the panorama to bring it into focus. A smile forms as the same scene, now full of bodies, superimposes on the empty space like a lap-dissolve edit. The smile gracing the new visual evokes a tourist gazing at the ocean for the first time, or possibly a mannequin on the cusp of animation. Something about this beach suddenly flares up from the recesses of her mind and re-shapes her lips to an alien emotion but twitches and returns to form, feeling now like she's impenetrable to voices or visions. She takes several deep breaths while retreating from the window and steps toward the mirror again.

Without looking at her face, she eases her fingers over it like she's testing the texture of a mango at a stand on the boardwalk. While still gracing the skin, she peeks, then freezes, urging the feel and the vision into concordance. Reasonably assured, she glances at the syringe on the adjacent table and grins while retrieving the remote from the coffee table. The screen brightens and she speeds through the channels, pleased to have regained control of her apparatus. She ratchets through a sequence of propulsive sounds, settling for an easy-listening station that's more in tune with her mood. Returning to the mirror she spreads the creamy contents of a vial on her face but stops, wondering whether she even needs another application. Semi-distracted, she grasps her frizzed-out but kempt hair and ponders how natural the rust-colored mass will appear sprinkled with random strands of gray. She decides it works as the screen fades to black and the music ceases, returning as a rhythmic dance beat. The images on the screen flicker but refuse to register a recognizable scene like they're caught between signals. She tries to shut it off, but it won't oblige.

Finally, an exercise routine comes into focus, and she blinks several times before inching ever closer to the screen. It's a mesmerizing display, a much different routine than the earlier one and with fewer participants. It seems to be more of a dance arrangement than a strenuous workout. The lighting is muted and sensual, making it hard to see most faces clearly except that of the female orchestrator who looks familiar. It appears to be a younger version of Phoebe, her social worker. She choreographs her energetic movements with the grace of a dancer, her expression radiating through the filtered light. Lili is riveted by this performance. Phoebe's body comes to rest, and she seems to gaze at Lili for an instant as the music becomes more complex, like the rhythmic surface is being invaded by a string of anti-melodies. The exercise routine now shifts and Lili proceeds to mimic the bodies on the screen.

The pellucid, orangish ball is half submerged below the horizon as the light in Lili's room is fading fast. Soon she won't be able to see her doodles on the pad. While trying to concentrate on the conversation she's having on the phone, she sketches a wavy line across a new page on her pad, and it begins to take shape as a figure. She chuckles, apologizing to the person she's talking to, and continues.

"Do you remember if anyone ever called me a… superwoman," Lili asks her phone companion, "or did I mention someone had?"

"No…I can't. When would this be? We haven't known each other for very long, but I don't recall you ever mentioning it."

"There's a whole patch of time back there I can't recall, and it seems to be getting bigger and bigger but… voices…voices have been bursting into my head recently, pieces of dialogue that seem lifted right out of the past." The figure she's been sketching gives her a start and she grimaces. "Maybe the sessions here are working, but so far it seems I'm only meeting people that…scare me."

"So, tell me your big secret…what do you have planned for tonight?"

Lili hesitates as if she doesn't understand the question and stares at the pad on her lap. Cringing now at the developed figure, she tosses the pad onto the coffee table and peruses the darkening room.

"I'm not sure I can…I'll let you know if I…"

A knock swivels her head to the door and forces a smile that quickly converts to a blank stare. The knock repeats, this time louder, and she springs up from the sofa.

"Com…ing…coming!" she blurts in a tone that surprises her, depositing the receiver on a cushion as she rises. She opens the door to a white coat.

"Good evening, Lili," graciously greets the white coat, a stout but shapely female with short, silverish hair. "There are two young men in the lobby who said they came to pick up an envelope. Do you want me to deliver it to them?"

"Well, thanks…yes, I mean no…could you tell them to come up to my room for a few minutes so I can…explain it to them?"

"Sure. Is everything okay?"

"Sure…sure. It's a family thing…thanks."

She leaves the door cracked slightly, hesitating briefly before shutting it. Forgetting the phone, she paces around the room deep in thought and rushes to the desk near the large window and retrieves an envelope. Noticing the beach strip is flush with twilight, she stretches to turn on the lamp to her right but instantly reneges and steps to the mirror for a look through the shadows as there's another knock at the door.

She opens it a few inches to a slender male face and hesitates while edging to the side away from the light streaming in.

"Hi. I've been expecting you…come in," she says in a tone of giddy surprise while swinging the door open, her frame whisking across the light source.

The male—tall, slender, and muscular with a mature flattop that's showing signs of expanding into an eraserhead doo—spurts through the door and gives the

space a panoramic once-over before pivoting to confront Lili's partially exposed presence.

"What is it, lady…what do you have for us?" he says matter-of-factly while craning to get a full glimpse of her. As if to accommodate him, she steps away from the door, keeping her back to him all the way to the center of the room. The other male now struts into the room and closes the door part way, fidgeting like he's not very comfortable. He's also tall and slender. but wiry, and he has long blonde hair tied back in a ponytail.

"Well, what ya got for us, lady?" queries the blond as he bounces around his partner to within a few feet of Lili, who remains facing away from them. Hesitating momentarily, she turns around with the envelope, managing a cordial smile, and hands it to the ponytail.

"This is the…asking…price," he utters while glancing between Lili and the bills and back to her, who he can now see more clearly. "But…what's it for? I mean…we were told that Debbie was at this address, and she would pay us for our services. But this place and… well, this must be some kinda mistake." He squints for a clearer look at Lili as she steps a few feet away from him and shifts her weight onto the other foot, her presence now draped in shadows.

"Debbie is my daughter but she…well, she called me earlier and…she has a lot of…problems and…a friend of hers took her to outpatients at…County and…well, this was supposed to be a present for her 21st birthday…but it's nice to see what I'm paying for! I mean you guys seem very…expensive and…well, and probably worth every…"

"So, you want us to contact her when she returns?" quips the eraserhead as he steps around the ponytail to triangulate Lili. They stare at her shadow-striated face and instantly pull her closer to the center of the room, framing her in a slither of light from the window to get a clear look. Releasing her, she steps a few feet further toward the window.

"Yes…but I'm not sure when she'll be okay so…I'll have to give you a call."

"Okay lady," blurts the eraserhead, "we'll…"

"But you guys don't have to…leave yet…as long as you're here you might as well stay and…"

"Do what lady?" queries the ponytail who stretches to scope her up and down.

"What…kind of services do you offer?"

"Wait a minute lady!" interjects the eraserhead. "We're not in the business of servicing the older set. Isn't this some kinda senior citizen center or something?"

"Something…but…we're not all seniors here. It's a creative kind of place where…they say we are re… retrieving our youth and…"

"How about a little more light?" queries the ponytail. "If you're not a senior then let us get a better look."

"There!" She pivots and gives them a full-frontal view. "Do I qualify for your…services?"

They squint through the shimmering shadows like they're not able to make out what's in front of them until a bright blotch exposes what seems to be a taut nipple, its quick disappearance leaving other isolated patches of light-exposed skin for them to ponder like pieces of a challenging visual puzzle.

"Lady, quit playing hide and seek with us!" exclaims the eraserhead. "We aren't into games and we certainly aren't into the gerontology set."

She rushes to the window and lets the twilight provide a better exposure, tossing her top onto the floor. "Do I qualify?"

"Okay lady, maybe you're not an over-the-hill senior citizen," returns the blond, "but we don't do auditions and…"

"Just let me show you!" Her tone changes and she seems to lose the initiative, which encourages them to inch closer. They stare at her and snicker, then smile caustically like they're imploring her next move. Several seconds pass.

"You can turn on the lights now, lady…we… have to go." The eraserhead speaks in a tone that suggests he's piqued by her and the situation and might want to see a bit more. The ponytail strides to the door as Lili reaches to turn on a lamp.

"Well, I can't say you don't qualify but… qualify for what I'm not sure." The eraserhead joins his partner by the door. They exchange chuckles. "If you wereauditioning…which you said you aren't, what would you want us for?"

She utters a sound that's somewhere between a muffled squeak and a botched giggle and races over to them, dropping her slacks. "Why don't you guys stick around for a little while? What ya got to lose? You can keep the money. You got somewhere else to go?"

"Yeah, lady, we got somewhere else to go," says the ponytail as he grasps her midsection, holding his hands in place for several seconds before releasing them. "So, you've been working out…you've got a pretty good chest…not many wrinkles or freckles. You probably spent some time under the knife, as expected for your age group."

She grabs his hands and pulls him firmly back to the center of the room, placing them on her breasts as she becomes stationary. "How old do you think I am?"

"Okay lady, you could pass for fifty with the right circumstances, but that's how old my mother is!" the eraserhead responds as he joins them, the ponytail continuing to cup her breasts.

"We're all in the mid-range when you think about it…neither young nor old. So, what's the big deal?" she asks, addressing the eraserhead. "You guys prejudiced or something?"

She now eyes the ponytail who slowly un-cups her breasts while giving her another once-over. "What's your story lady?" he queries, now appearing piqued by her presence. "Why are you in this…place?"

"Like I said it's a…creative…place and…they say it's for all ages." She drops her panties and backs a few steps away from them. "You guys need to expand your horizons. That's what they say to us in our…

sessions."

"What sessions?" asks the eraserhead, who steps closer and then inches around to her side, getting another vantage. The ponytail steps around to the other side. She is now in the center of their cross-gazes, each giving her body a thorough look while peeking at the other for reactions.

"Oh, just get-togethers where we…you know… talk and talk and get things out of our systems." She looks from one to the other repeatedly as she speaks and finally backsteps a few feet away with a quizzical expression. "Thought you guys were…professionals. You won't even strip for me?" She reaches and unbuttons the eraserhead's shirt, tossing it onto the sofa.

"Oh c'mon, lady…we haven't refused you anything," responds the eraserhead. "We haven't even figured out what kind of scene this is."

"It's the kind of scene it looks like."

"It looks like a pretty confusing one, lady."

"Your eyes are so cold but exciting…and… powerful. How did you get this way?"

As she speaks the ponytail steps behind her and cups her breasts before massaging her nipples. "My hands…my fingers, feel electrified!"

She reaches for the eraserhead and pulls him toward her, stripping his bottom garments down to a rising tide…

John O'Kane is the publisher of *AMASS Magazine* and the author of the forthcoming book, *Jukebox Confessionals.*

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AI ABUNDANCE: MEANING BEYOND WORK

ELLEN BROWN

Discussions of artificial intelligence typically begin with the question*, What happens when the machines take our jobs?* For thousands of years, work has been the means by which we fed our families, earned our place in society, and gave structure to our lives. We have come to equate paid employment with identity.

That presumption may soon be obsolete.

When Elon Musk proposed replacing Universal Basic Income with what he calls a Universal High Income—a level of income sufficient for everyone to live comfortably while intelligent machines produce much of the goods and services society requires—critics warned that people would become lazy. They would stop pursuing college degrees, stop starting businesses, stop inventing, stop contributing. Without jobs, it was argued, life itself would lose meaning and purpose.

Interestingly, humanity's oldest written history begins with the premise that the purpose of humans is to work. The earliest known writing was impressed into clay tablets in ancient Sumer more than five thousand years ago. The Sumerian Atrahasis tablets tell of sky-deities called Annunaki, cast in modern "ancient architect" scenarios as extraterrestrial engineers. The heavy labor required to maintain life on earth was delegated to junior gods called Igigi, who finally grew weary of the arduous work, laid down their tools and rebelled.

The remedy was to create a new being to carry their burden. This was done by genetic manipulation to upgrade the highest life form found here, creating the human species. Whether we read that as history, allegory, or mythology, its underlying message is that humanity was conceived as a labor force – and human civilization begins with a control system to manage the laborers.

The first writing was not poetry or philosophy. It was accounting: grain tallies, labor quotas, rations, obligations. Most of the original cuneiform tablets were administrative records. What began as an exchange system evolved into a money system to control work and the workers performing it. For nearly six thousand years, human worth has been measured by our productivity. We deserve food and shelter because we worked for it.

In many respects, life is still organized around compulsory labor. Writing was devised to organize it. Accounting on clay tablets predated the use of coins, managed by temple priests as intermediaries for the gods. The temple evolved into private banks, with bankers intermediating commerce.

In the 1930s, British economist and philosopher John Maynard Keynes predicted that by the end of the twentieth century, technological advancement would reduce the work-week to just fifteen hours. So why is the forty-hour work week still the norm? It has been argued that our current economic structure uses "busyness" as a form of social containment. By tethering survival to forty hours of corporate or administrative labor, the system ensures that the majority of human creative power is spent serving institutional interests rather than personal or community liberation.

AI abundance is not the end of work but the beginning of choice, and choice is the beginning of meaning.

–Ellen Brown

That may be why modern life feels increasingly saturated with what anthropologist David Graeber termed "Bullshit Jobs" in a book of that name—pointless administrative tasks that serve little social purpose, but that keep people too exhausted to pursue their own interests. He argued that the rise of "fake" work is a political device to keep people from having the free time to organize or rebel. But if artificial intelligence takes over the majority of production, that changes the meaning of work.

From Scarcity to Abundance

For centuries, scarcity shaped human behavior. Scarcity taught people to guard, to compete, to fear loss. But abundance changes the emotional landscape. What happens if we are simply handed what we need to survive? Skeptics say people will stop working and learning, that society will collapse into idleness, that life will lose meaning without jobs. But pilot studies of Universal Basic Income (UBI) programs involving unconditional cash transfers to recipients show otherwise.

UBI studies from around the world have shown positive results from UBI payments, including higher employment, lower crime, better mental health, higher graduation rates, and little evidence of a retreat from productive activity. Relieved of the constant anxiety of maintaining survival, participants typically pursue education, care for family members, search for better

jobs, or start businesses they would not have dared to take on if failure meant destitution. It seems that necessity is not the only mother of invention.

Granted, the payout in most U.S. studies was a marginal $500 or $600 per month, only enough to provide a safety net for basic food and shelter. Plenty of motivation was left to add income for the finer things in life. Studies of the effects of a Universal High Income of $50,000 or more per year have not been done. But many people who are no longer working for pay, either because they are retired or because they have an inheritance or investments to live on, volunteer their time for socially beneficial causes.

Parents devote extraordinary energy to raising children without receiving a paycheck. Volunteers spend countless hours building community organizations. Amateur musicians practice difficult instruments for years with little expectation of financial reward. Scientists have pursued questions that fascinated them long before the result was likely to be commercially valuable. Thousands of programmers worked without pay to develop Linux open source software, and editors work for free to produce Wikipedia, just for reputation, community and the satisfaction of solving hard problems. These activities are not work for wages, but they are work that is quite meaningful to the people engaged in them.

The Enlightenment: Largely the Legacy of the Leisure Class

The intellectual triumphs of the European Enlightenment—the era that birthed modern science, political liberty, and the social contract—were primarily the domain of a wealthy leisure class, or of talent that was financially backed by institutional support (church, courts, universities) or personal patronage.

Sociologist Thorstein Veblen laid out this thesis in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). He argued that scholarly pursuit functioned as a form of "conspicuous leisure"—a way to demonstrate financial strength by engaging in activities that were "unproductive" in the immediate economic sense. To spend decades debating the nature of sovereignty or the movement of the stars required a measure of "unearned increment" or rent extraction. Examples included:

Francis Bacon (1561–1626): As Lord Chancellor and a member of the high nobility, Bacon's scientific methodology was fueled by the resources of the state and inherited status.

Robert Boyle (1627–1691): The father of modern chemistry was the son of the "Great Earl of Cork," then the wealthiest man in the British Isles. His work was conducted as a "gentleman scientist" with no need for professional employment.

Antoine Lavoisier (1743–1794): Lavoisier funded the world's most advanced chemical laboratory through his role as a "Tax Farmer" for the French crown—a position of pure financial extraction.

For those not born into the elite, intellectual survival usually required "aristocratic patronage." John Locke's influential work was made possible by his residency and support from the Earl of Shaftesbury, while Thomas Hobbes was a lifelong dependent of the Cavendish family. This system ensured that even "revolutionary" ideas were filtered through the lens of those who benefited most from the existing social hierarchy.

The irony is that the very thinkers who theorized about "universal human rights" and "liberty" did so from a position of security provided by the systems of land-rent and debt-extraction they were analyzing. To create truly universal "liberty" requires a secure income for all.

Non-compulsory Education

For over a century, schools have functioned as labor factories, designed to produce compliant workers for industrial economies. If labor is no longer the center of life, education must change as well. AI already performs memorization and standardized tasks better than humans, relieving us of the need to perfect those skills ourselves. But that does not mean there is nothing left to learn. Studies of "Self-Directed Education" or "Unschooling" suggest that children are biologically wired to learn, and that removing the coercion of traditional schooling leads not to ignorance but to highly motivated, specialized learners. Self-directed education produces young adults who retain their curiosity and creativity, develop emotional intelligence, and pursue mastery for its own sake.

A 2013/2014 survey of 75 unschooled adults conducted by educational psychologists Peter Gray and Gina Riley found that 83% went on to some form of higher education. Despite not having a high school diploma, they reported little trouble getting into college, often using portfolios, interviews, or community college credits to bridge the gap. A high percentage of unschoolers pursued careers in the creative arts or became entrepreneurs. The researchers reported that unschooling helped them develop the self-reliance and out-of-the-box thinking required for these fields.

A South African study found that while "unschooled" students may have followed non-traditional paths, they often achieved high levels of professional success, particularly in creative and entrepreneurial fields. Intrinsic curiosity replaced extrinsic rewards (grades or job requirements) as the primary driver for learning.

Research on children who learn to read through unschooling shows wide variance in when they start (anywhere from age 4 to 14), but once they decide they want to read, they often reach grade-level proficiency in a matter of months rather than years because they are personally invested. Proponents argue that traditional schooling actually stifles learning by making it a chore.

The Sudbury Valley School model (founded in 1968) is a radical form of democratic education based on the belief that children are naturally curious and capable of managing their own learning. In a Sudbury school,

there are no grades or required classes. Instead, students of all ages (5–18) mix freely and decide for themselves how to spend their time. Long-term studies of graduates show that they overwhelmingly transition successfully into higher education and careers, often citing the school's emphasis on responsibility, self-direction, and democratic participation as the primary drivers of their adult success.

Self-directed learning doesn't require an independent income, but the point is that the drive to learn and to apply that education to useful pursuits is an inherent human trait, in both children and adults. It's something we want to do and will do, whether or not an employer requires it.

Self-actualization and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

American psychologist Abraham Maslow conceptualized the needs or goals that motivate human behavior in a clinical review in 1943. He argued that once physiological and safety needs are met, humans naturally move toward "Self-actualization" – the realization of personal potential and pursuit of creative activities. In his later years, Maslow added a level above self-actualization called "Self-transcendence", where people focus on goals outside themselves (altruism, community and caregiving).

That natural evolution can be applied not just to individuals but to civilizations. As AI and robotics free us from the self-centered needs of survival, we can awaken to our larger purposes of collective actualization and harmonious progress.

Escaping the Welfare Trap

That's the promise of AI – that it can free up our time so that we can escape the meaningless "busyness" of paid labor and pursue goals more meaningful to ourselves. But the same digital tools have a darker side. Catherine Austin Fitts and other critics warn that AI could become the ultimate "digital panopticon"—a weapon of entrapment by which programmable money and algorithmic surveillance create a modern "golden cage" in which the right to receive "welfare" is tied to political compliance. The UBI thus becomes a tool of coercion.

The same technology, however, offers tools to avoid that trap. Decentralized, neutral identity systems and zero-knowledge proofs allow people to establish that they are unique humans without revealing personal data. Zero-knowledge proofs are a cryptographic method by which one party can prove to another that a statement is true without revealing any additional information. A neutral protocol is one in which the rules are transparent, fixed, and cannot discriminate against specific users. By using "Smart Contracts" on a blockchain, the distribution of UHI becomes automated. The code only checks if the user has a valid, unique identity proof. It cannot check the user's political party, criminal record or social behavior (unless explicitly part of the code). A government-issued digital currency could also be generated using the privacy-protected, peer-to-peer models of Project Hamilton and the ECASH bill.

Those are political decisions, dependent on a democratic system governed by and for the people. Mandating that these tools be incorporated into any government payments system can ensure that UHI remains a right of existence rather than a reward for obedience.

If AI can handle production, it removes the original justification for compulsory labor. The choice is whether we use AI to automate our enslavement or to finally automate our exit from the Sumerian story, transforming ourselves from a managed labor force into a self-directed, creative civilization.

Rewriting the Human Story

For six thousand years, humanity has lived inside the Sumerian story: we were created to work for external masters. But AI has brought us to the point where labor no longer must be our master. AI abundance is not the end of work but the beginning of choice, and choice is the beginning of meaning.

Our first choice must be to insist on a democratic government run in the public interest, and a financial system that supports independent endeavor. Freeing humanity from compulsory labor can then provide the freedom for us to develop more fully as human beings.

Some people will create art. Some will teach. Some will explore science, history, biology, or engineering. Some will build communities. Families may simply become more present with each other. For the first time in history, large numbers of people may have the time and stability to ask the deeper questions about the meaning of life and the unique purpose of their own lives.

In the new story that emerges, we can see ourselves not as laborers but as musicians. We can make beautiful music together, but we need the other instruments. An orchestra is beautiful because each instrument contributes its unique voice to a larger harmony. The promise of AI is to free us from compulsory labor so that we can explore our own unique gifts and discover the music only we can play.

Ellen Brown is an attorney, founder of the *Public Banking Institute*, and author of thirteen books including *Web of Debt, The Public Bank Solution,* and *Banking on the People: Democratizing Money in the Digital Age.* Her 600+ blog articles are posted at EllenBrown.com.

"Journalism is printing what someone else does not want printed. Everything else is public relations.

– George Orwell

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GEN Z'S BREAKOUT SUMMER

RACHEL JANFAZA

If you're Gen Z and it feels like something is different this summer, you're not alone.

I've spent my career documenting — and living — this generation's coming of age through reporting, focus groups, and surveys. More than anything else, and especially for younger Zoomers, it's been characterized by the experience of the pandemic, which left many still feeling bitter and isolated even years later.

But lately, the vibes are very different. Performative pessimism is out. The summer of 2026 has been called a "Great American Sleepover" that will be known decades from now as "the good ole days" and "the best of times." After years of post-pandemic malaise that saw young people's mental health plummet as they opted for online engagement over offline opportunities, embraced a politics of doubt, and channeled their frustration into nostalgia for simpler times, nature is finally healing. A cohort whose coming of age was stunted by the chaos of 2020 is finally coming out of its shell.

We've seen it packed movie theaters and record-smashing ticket sales for *Spider-Man: Brand New Day* and *The Odyssey*. We've seen it in sports, especially in New York City, where joyous people filled the streets for weeks shoulder to shoulder, first for the New York Knicks' championship run and later for the World Cup that concluded just across the river. For the young adults whose defining life experience to this point was being trapped inside, the images of impromptu mass gatherings and fan celebrations resonated far beyond the five boroughs.

But sports aren't the only thing that has communities coming together in person as of late. Doves of young people have been lining up for froyo on any given night of the week, Love Island-obsessed observers have gathered in bars to watch the dating show, and despite dwindling patriotism, communities nationwide celebrated the country's 250th birthday with hot dogs, fireworks, and fanfare.

As one 25-year-old from Illinois told me, it's the season of "summer-maxxing," which means "enjoying every bit of summer and the perks that come with it."

In my own conversations and research, there's a burgeoning sense that — for the first time in their lives — young people are driving the cultural moment themselves rather than having it inflicted upon them by older adults and events outside of their control. Some of the comments in this piece were shared in focus groups. Others came from a qualitative survey sent out to Gen Z-ers.

But this summer, the summer of 2026, is a moment of its own, and it involves engaging with the present rather than wishing we were somewhere else.

– Rachel Janfaza

And while hope is a fragile thing, the implications could be profound. Through my work, I've tracked Gen Z's loneliness and the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic for years — examining how the damage has shown up in school, work, and politics, and even split my generation in two. The national conversation about young people has been just as dark, featuring stories overwhelmingly about what they aren't doing: Hanging out with friends, hooking up, taking risks. A generation dismissed as terminally online is taking its politics offline as well, making their presence loudly known in primaries by walking neighborhoods, knocking on doors, and turning out voters.

In recent years, post-pandemic trauma expressed itself in a craving for simpler times that fueled Gen Z's nostalgia era. Young adults daydreamed about how good things must have been back in the 1990s, or in the early 2000s, or even within their own lifetime, before the pandemic, before the 2016 election, and especially before smartphones, social media, and AI took over the world. This nostalgia even helped power some young voters' rightward shift in 2024, as they embraced a candidate who ran on a campaign to bring back the pre-pandemic past.

But this summer, the summer of 2026, is a moment of its own, and it involves engaging with the present rather than wishing we were somewhere else.

Take the movies, an industry that doomsayers warned was in danger of extinction after the pandemic trained a generation to stay inside with streaming devices. Instead, this summer has seen two massive box-office hits — Obsession and Backrooms — that were made by young people, for young people, and saw young audiences turn out in droves for repeat in-person viewings. Obsession, directed by 26-year-old Curry Barker, drew on Gen Z's anxieties about dating and intimacy. Backrooms, directed by 21-year-old Kane Parsons, drafted off a YouTube horror meme about people trapped in (generational metaphor alert) a never-ending indoor space.

It's probably not a coincidence that these movies came out at a time Gen Z was confronting their post-pandemic fears of isolation head-on. Again and again in focus group conversations across the country, I've heard from young people who are looking to log off their devices and spend time together

in-person.

"People seem a lot more interested in experiences rather than just like going out to go out," a 17-year-old girl from Arkansas said. "People want to go…to concerts, go play pickleball, go to farmers market[s], go thrifting, go hiking, go on a coffee run. I think it's just kind of more looking for community as opposed to entertainment."

There are other signs of behavioral shifts. After years of data showing Gen Z drinking less than their adult peers, they are now keeping up with older generations: 74 percent of Gen Z reported drinking alcohol in March 2026, almost on par with the 76 percent rate for boomers, according to an IWSR report released in July. The report also found something very telling — rather than drinking to unwind, as has been the case for older generations, Gen Z is drinking more to socialize and to be with others.

In cultural events around the country, you can see this appetite for in-person gatherings that force young adults to unplug. The generationally beloved Phoebe Bridgers hosted phone-free concerts where she required her fans to put their devices in Yondr pouches. And there are impromptu "lie down" gatherings meant to encourage a collective, communal pause that are happening in Central Park. To keep up with this shift, Tinder — the epitome of online dating — will launch in-person dating events in 26 cities by the end of September, signaling that any business interested in capturing Gen Z must now have an in-person component.

A generation dismissed as terminally online is taking its politics offline as well, making their presence loudly known in primaries by walking neighborhoods, knocking on doors, and turning out voters. When I ask focus groups about which politicians catch their attention, they've brought up figures like James Talarico, Jon Ossoff, and Marco Rubio, who they identify as having a more energetic and optimistic approach. Young people have often mentioned New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani as a model politician, and one of the traits I hear consistently that they like about him is that he is out in the street and easy to bump into. His online videos also emphasize him out in the world, interacting with constituents, or walking down the entire island of Manhattan.

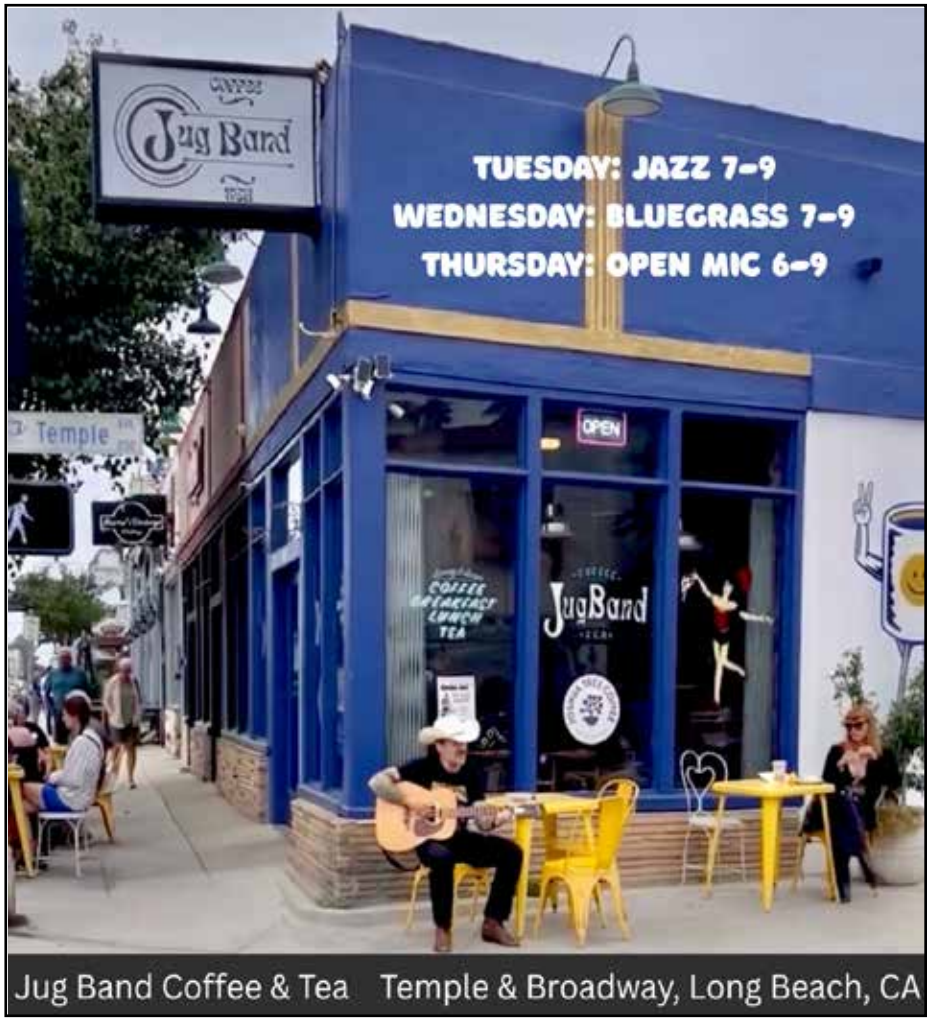
"I think there's a stronger presence of people coming together, whether it is for their favorite sports team with the NBA Finals and World Cup (let's go Knicks!), stronger political activism, especially with primaries coming up in various states, and simply attending events like Pride parades," one 30-year-old man from Brooklyn said.

There's no doubt that we're experiencing something new. The question then becomes whether it's a momentary trend: Where does the IRL energy go when it gets cold, dark, and college kids are back in school?

As the reality of fall intrudes, the vibes could certainly shift. And it will take time to see whether these nascent cultural trends show up in hard data — one thing I'll be watching is whether Gen Z's trademark self-reported anxiety, unhappiness, and loneliness start finally reversing.

But I do see a world in which some of the Gen Z summer trends persist — perhaps we'll see more in-person NFL watch parties or fantasy football drafts, community organizing for midterm election candidates, and more energy around in-person celebrations for Halloween or Friendsgiving.

My bet is the post-nostalgia era is here to stay. Just as Boomers were permanently changed by the "Summer of Love" — a period some history-minded young people have compared this season to — this is going to be a core memory going forward. It's our time now, and we're not going back inside.



Jug Band Coffee & Tea Temple & Broadway, Long Beach, CA

ELECTIONS

IT'S NOT THE LEFT RISING. IT'S THE CENTER FALLING

ASTEAD HERNDON

There are two ways of looking at the current divides within the Democratic Party. The first — and more dominant — narrative is that the party's left wing is on an upward march, one that began with New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's election in 2025 and has continued through this year's Democratic primary season.

The second, and I believe more accurate, explanation is that the party is rudderless — an ideological fight to be settled in the next presidential election — and that the left's success in New York City, Colorado, and even Maine (before Graham Platner's campaign collapsed) grows out of a void left by a bigger, less-talked-about story: an establishment in free fall, on the wrong side of fundamental shifts across its own rank-and-file base.

The difference between those interpretations is fine, but important. I don't think the Democratic base agrees with every position articulated by successful left-wing candidates — like "all deportations are wrong" (as NYC's Darializa Avila Chevalier told me) — or have suddenly become committed democratic socialists. But I do think the left is on the right side of the gateway issues the base is currently prioritizing: a working-class-led affordability agenda, a skepticism of artificial intelligence, and a moral opposition to President Donald Trump's war against Iran and to Israel's campaigns of violence in Lebanon and Gaza. Those issues, more than any others, have defined the Democratic Party's internal battles since 2024.

Progressives have also benefited from a moderate wing that, in many cases, has yet to lay out an affirmative vision. After the signature policies of the Biden administration flopped as political motivators, the center has seemed frozen in time, unable to offer its own blueprint for the electorate's concerns ("abundance" aside). When I sat down with Third Way president Jon Cowan, he had no trouble assailing Hasan Piker, Abdul El-Sayed, or any number of the party's most prominent progressive figures. But when I asked whether Third Way was actually responding to the clear shifts among the electorate — on Medicare-for-all, on abolishing ICE, on foreign aid to Israel — his answer was far less sure.

The establishment needs an affirmative reason to be chosen — and it hasn't found one. So here's my amendment to the narrative of the moment.

– Astead Herndon

Cowan:

"We've never said that there's a problem with Hasan Piker because he advocates for Medicare-for-all. … I think Medicare-for-all is still very problematic as a political issue, and if someone were nominated for president on the Democratic ticket and they were for Medicare-for-all, I think it would be a major barrier to getting elected. But that's not our beef with Hasan Piker at all."

It was the same evasion whenever the conversation turned from the messengers to the message. In a recent interview with US Rep. Jim Clyburn — the powerful South Carolina Democrat who has endorsed US Rep. Haley Stevens's Senate run in Michigan — he bluntly defended insider politics, insisting party leadership was not at fault for the 2024 result. The blame, he told me, belonged to the Black voters who hadn't turned out for Kamala Harris.

Clyburn: When the white vote turned out 71 percent two years ago, and the Black vote turned out 59 percent, you tell me whose fault that is. … If that 59 percent had been 69 percent, she would've won."

When I asked him directly whether the argument was that Black voters had let Harris down, he didn't hesitate: "In many instances, absolutely." It is a remarkable thing to hear from a member of leadership — the base failed us, not the other way around — and it is exactly the instinct that has the establishment on its back foot.

This is why I think it matters to read the Democratic Party's post-2024 convulsion as a story of establishment collapse rather than left-wing ascension. Stevens, Clyburn, and the party's leadership would prefer to make this a referendum on the left — on the acceptability of its candidates and its media figures. But the base is communicating something else: a lack of confidence in the center, and in a version of establishment politics that prizes seniority and loyalty over voters' values. Establishment collapse also explains the Democratic results that don't fit neatly on the moderate vs. progressive binary: like Attorney

General Phil Weiser's victory in Colorado or whatever is happening in the Wisconsin governor's race.

The center's other problem is that its core general-election pitch — we may not thrill you, but we're not Trump — is losing relevance the weaker that Trump looks politically. I spent a night at Trump's UFC event on the White House lawn in June, an evening engineered to speak to the young men who broke his way in 2024 and found plenty of them cooling. "He was promising lower prices on everything," one told me. "We didn't know wars were gonna start." Even the MAGA operative Jack Posobiec conceded that "the numbers are softer today, there's no question about that."

When the opposition's own coalition is cracking, branding yourself as an inoffensive vessel who can gather up the most anti-Trump voters looks less compelling. The establishment needs an affirmative reason to be chosen — and it hasn't found one.

So here's my amendment to the narrative of the moment: The story isn't a left-wing party discovering its confidence. It's an establishment losing its own — and a base voting, in New York, in Colorado, and soon in Michigan and Wisconsin, on how much faith it still has that the center will name what it actually wants and fight for it.

A Michigan reporter's take on the Democratic Senate race

I reached out to Samuel Robinson, a reporter for the state's oldest Black newspaper, the Michigan Chronicle; he also has a Substack, Detroit One Million. Robinson is based on Detroit's east side, and he's someone I've known for a while, as we're both members of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Both the Democrats' moderate and progressive wings have invested so much in the state — it's become the proxy war in the party's fight over its future. What is it about Michigan that you think has made the stakes so high?

"Stakes are high because of the control of Congress. But also, Michigan is like a microcosm of America. It swings back and forth every four, eight years. But our US Senate seats have been held by Democrats since 1992. Republicans say they're going to spend a ton of money to flip the seat being opened by Gary Peters retiring. Women moderates (Dana Nessel, Gretchen Whitmer, Jocelyn Benson) won big in 2018, and eight years later, all three to some degree have disappointed their own voters. Dems had a legislative trifecta from 2022 to 2024, and many people feel like Dems let down Black residents who got them elected in the first place." That's one thing that unites the Black progressives and the Black establishment: Members in both camps feel the Democratic Party hasn't done enough.

How would you describe the difference between a Haley Stevens supporter and an Abdul El-Sayed supporter?

"Haley supporter — usually older; the young people I've met who support her typically come from wealthier backgrounds. Haley supporters are usually not involved in politics or people who keep up with national discourse. Haley supporters are worried about the gutting of the Voting Rights Act. They are worried about Trump nationalizing elections or not leaving the White House after '28."

"Abdul supporter — usually younger; the older people I've met who support him often acknowledge they are in the minority of their peers. The younger people who support him are all over the place in terms of their backgrounds — rich, poor, highly educated, no college. He has the support of most young people under 35. They are mostly worried about sending American taxpayer dollars to Israel, and the influence of AIPAC. I hear more about that than I do Medicare-for-all."

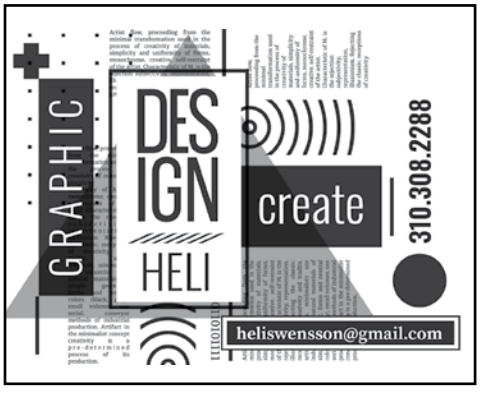
Stevens has sought to capitalize on El-Sayed's perceived weakness with the Black vote. How real do you think that vulnerability is?

"Abdul struggles with certain Black voters mostly because they don't know who he is. I've heard from countless people who have said something to the degree of, "I don't know enough about him." He received media attention as the Detroit and Wayne County health director, but not enough for people to feel it. Most people know that he ran for governor in 2018 with no experience. People see Haley Stevens ads and mailers. Most Black voters aren't on Twitter."

I saw this post on X where you were talking to a Stevens supporter who expressed some pretty bigoted claims about El-Sayed's candidacy. How widespread is that sentiment? When I was reporting on Mamdani's election in New York City, it was clear that there was anxiety among the Black political class that the rise of Asian, Latino, Muslim communities could displace them. Is that fear at play here?

The race is definitely a tension point between Wayne County's Black and Muslim population. Many who have shared with me similar sentiments will point to the anti-Black racism and exploitation of our community at the hands of Arab gas station and liquor store owners. That resentment builds up and then bubbles over in a race like this. We certainly live amongst each other, like off Seven Mile on the east side, where Bengali families and Black families live side by side as next-door neighbors. But there's a resentment that goes both ways.

Astead Herndon writes for *The Lever* and other publications.



REVIEW

BEAT DHARMA: ALLEN GINSBERG & OTHER CRAZY DUMBSAINTS OF THE MIND

RICHARD MODIANO

Beat Dharma: Allen Ginsberg & Other Crazy Dumbsaints of the Mind (Beatdom Publications, 2026) is a fascinating and deeply informed collection of essays that stands apart from the considerable body of writing on the Beat Generation and Buddhism. Marc Olmsted brings together literary criticism, memoir, intellectual history, and spiritual reflection in a way that feels both scholarly and personal. Rather than treating Buddhism as an exotic influence on Beat literature, he examines it as a living tradition that shaped—and was shaped by—the writers at its center.

What distinguishes this book from many previous studies of the Beats is that Olmsted writes not simply as a literary critic or cultural historian, but as a longtime Buddhist practitioner thoroughly grounded in the tradition's canonical texts. That gives him a significant advantage over many writers who have explored the relationship between Buddhism and the Beats. He understands Buddhist philosophy from the inside, allowing him to recognize where Beat writers genuinely grasped Buddhist ideas, where they misunderstood them, and how their understanding evolved through actual practice and relationships with accomplished teachers. His discussions of concepts such as emptiness, shamatha, vipashyana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and "first thought, best thought" are informed by lived experience as well as careful study.

Olmsted also benefits from firsthand knowledge of many of his subjects. His personal relationships with Allen Ginsberg and other figures in the Beat orbit lend the essays an authenticity impossible to manufacture. Anecdotes never become mere reminiscence; instead, they illuminate larger questions about poetry, meditation, artistic spontaneity, and the transmission of wisdom across cultures.

The collection is particularly strong in its reassessment of Allen Ginsberg's mature Buddhist practice. Olmsted convincingly argues that Ginsberg's later work cannot be fully understood without appreciating the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, especially the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Gelek Rinpoche. Rather than reducing Beat Buddhism to the familiar story of Zen and The Dharma Bums, the book reveals a far richer and more nuanced spiritual landscape.

More than a study of literary history, DHARMA argues that the Beat movement's enduring significance lies in its sincere search for awakening through language, art, and direct experience.

– Richard Modiano

The essays are intellectually ambitious yet highly readable. Olmsted moves comfortably between literary analysis, Buddhist philosophy, Beat history, and personal recollection, making unexpected but persuasive connections. Readers already familiar with the Beats will discover fresh perspectives, while those interested in Buddhism will appreciate the accuracy and depth with which Buddhist ideas are presented.

More than a study of literary history, DHARMA argues that the Beat movement's enduring significance lies in its sincere search for awakening through language, art, and direct experience. Whether discussing Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Corso, or lesser-known figures, Olmsted consistently asks how genuine spiritual practice informs artistic creation.

This is an important contribution to Beat scholarship. It succeeds because it is written by someone uniquely qualified to bridge two worlds: a writer intimately acquainted with the Beat community and a serious practitioner whose understanding of Buddhist doctrine extends beyond secondary sources into the canonical tradition itself. The result is a book that is both illuminating and original—one that deepens our understanding not only of the Beats, but of the Buddhist ideas that profoundly influenced their work.

Richard Modiano is the co-editor of the recent poetry collection, *Catching Fire: The Los Angeles Wildfires* and the author of *The Forbidden Lunchbox,* winner of the 2022 Joe Hill Prize for labor poetry. He is also a Pushcart Prize nominee and former executive director of the Beyond Baroque Literary/ Arts Center. *The Huffington Post* named him one of 200 people doing the most to promote poetry in the United States. (*AMASS* issue 70 includes a full-length interview.)



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