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Mr. Yvon A. Labbé, Directoeur
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Dear Yvon,

Here is a manuscript of the essay I told you about when I saw you in September. I hope a hard copy is okay. I've gone over it a couple of times, but I'm the world's worst at proofreading his own stuff, so I will apologize in advance for any typos I may have missed.

Let me know what you think. The original draft was written in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, but I've revised and updated it where it seemed appropriate.

Sincerely,

Shawn Côte

Enclosure

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First North American Rights
3137 words

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A FEW REASONABLE WORDS
By Shawn Cote

As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

1 Timothy 6:11-19

If that is the way they pray, that is bullets through people's hearts, I hope they will not pray for me: I should rather be excused.

William Apess, Pequot (Cleary 33)

If catastrophe is a rebuff of enterprise, then the events of September 11, 2001, may serve as grisly proof of the destructibility and destructive potential of our most ambitious works. Whether the works themselves—in this case, powerful symbols of industry and empire—were worth sweat and ingenuity that went into their construction is debatable. Whether they were worth blood shed in their destruction is much less so. To the merciful, even to those of us without love or admiration for the military-industrial complex, the violence of that day and its aftermath have been anything but a satisfaction. But terrible as the events were, they were not unimaginable. The late Edward Abbey, for one, would have recognized the butchery as part of an established pattern. “The industrial way of life leads to the industrial way of death,” he wrote. “From Shiloh to Dachau, from Antietam to Stanligard, from Hiroshima to Vietnam and Afghanistan, the great specialty

of industry and technology has been the mass production of human corpses” (*A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* 100).

At no time in American history has the adage “the bigger they are, the harder they fall” been so devastatingly accurate, even if its application here seems flip. Not surprisingly, it is a lesson our government and business leaders have chosen to ignore. Long before the dust had begun to settle on the rubble and human remains, these enterprisers were urging us to resume our workday lives, insisting, in Abbey’s words, that “‘growth’ and ‘power’ are intrinsic goods, of which we can never have enough, or even too much. As if commendable rat were a rat twelve hands high at the shoulders—and still growing” (*Down the River* 39). One of their “commendable rats” had been destroyed, along with the thousands of human beings it had swallowed whole, but the rat’s engineers chose to impose their own narrative and moral. More than two years later, they remain in denial. “We must not let the terrorists win,” has become their rallying cry (and the terrorists are *always* someone else). The challenge, as they have seen it has been finding a way to reconcile grief and anxiety with the boosterism, not merely for the economy’s sake but for our own, because of course we all know that our “jobs” and “careers” are all that we live for.

“Ours is essentially a tragic age, so we refuse to take it tragically,” wrote D.H. Lawrence more than seventy years ago, in *Lady Chatterly’s Lover* (1). But Mellors, the title character of that novel, sees industrialization as an obscene human folly. “I don’t believe in the world, not in money, nor in advancement, nor in the future of civilization,” he says. “If there’s got to be a future for humanity, there’ll have to be a very big change from what now is.” The future, according to Constance Chatterly, lies not in her crippled husband’s wealth but in the “courage” of her lover’s “tenderness” (286). The gamekeeper is about half persuaded by this argument. Separated from Connie and their unborn child at the novel’s end, he writes her a letter in which he affirms, “You can’t assure against the future, except by really believing in the best little bit of you, and in the power beyond it...I believe in a higher mystery, that doesn’t let even the crocus be blown out” (311, 312).

That “higher mystery” has little to do with false gods of our politicians and free marketers. Clearly, theirs is an agenda to be regarded as suspect. Given what has happened in Afghanistan and Iraq over the past couple of years—not only to the civilian populations of those counties but to the occupying troops as well—it should be obvious that men who exploit the fear and outrage of an aggrieved people in order to win support for their own criminal acts should not be mistaken as champions of liberty. A terrorist is a

terrorist, whether he operates from a Third-World country or the Oval Office. Our sanctimonious president calls himself a patriot. I'm sure Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein have similarly high opinions of themselves.

The survivors of the September 11th massacre have suffered injuries, which no degree of consumer confidence or flag waving can repair. The real threats to our society, to humanity, cannot be diminished by retail therapy or the blandishment of corporate demagogues. Golden calves and tin gods have never served us well. We may pray for relief, but we should also think about what it really means when George W. Bush and men like him ask God to bless America. As farmer and writer Wendell Berry points out:

Ignoring the Gospels' command to be merciful, forgiving, loving, and peaceable, our leaders have prayed only for the success of their arms and policies and have thus made for themselves a state religion—exactly what they claim to fear in “fundamentalist” Islam. But why God might particularly favor nations whose economy is founded foursquare on the seven deadly sins is a mystery that has not been explained. (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 85)

With or without prayers, our decisions ought to be informed by knowledge, compassion, humility and sober reflection, not blind faith in our leadership. In this, we can look to Berry again for edification:

We must recognize that the standards of the industrial economy lead inevitably to war against humans just as they lead inevitably to war against nature. We must learn to prefer quality over quantity, service over profit, neighborliness over competition, people and other creatures over machines, health over wealth, a democratic prosperity over centralized wealth and power, economic health over “economic growth.” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 91)

More than a decade ago, Berry and others spoke out against US forces waging a war for cheap oil in the Persian Gulf. Only now does it begin to register—one hopes—that Saudi oil might not come as cheaply as we once thought.

One day, there won't *any* oil, cheap or otherwise, to fight over. Given the fact and the environmental toll of domestic oil spills (an average of 30 gallons per year since 1990, according to the November 2001 issue of *Harper's*), one has to question the wisdom of our dependence on that resource, whether the source be foreign or domestic. “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone,” said

Henry David Thoreau (106). Almost a century and a half after his death, mainstream society has yet to catch on.

But it is precisely our unwillingness to “let things alone” that has given us our “commendable rats.” The masterminds of the September 11th attacks understood how difficult it would be for men armed with jetliners to miss a target that was considerably more than “twelve hands high at the shoulders.” There is, it should go without saying, no justifying the attacks, but neither is there any way to deny that if radical fundamentalists hadn’t precipitated a catastrophe, someone or something else would have—and will in time, if there isn’t “a very big change from what now is.”

It needn’t have taken a tragedy on the order of September 11th to awaken us of the gravity of our situation, or to disabuse our plutocracy of any notions of invulnerability. Nor should it have taken the slaughter of thousands of their own to remind white-collar Americans of their humanity and human responsibilities. A better knowledge of history, a willingness to look beyond their own self-interests, an appreciation of the widening gap between the world’s rich and poor, and a true sense of the damage we have done to creation in the name of progress ought to have been enough to alert them to the eventuality of a reckoning, in whatever form, however justified or unjustified. Broaching the question of our culpability in the recent apocalypse does not make us apologists for terrorism; it only points to an awareness of the complexity of the issues and the roots causes of violence.

In wartime, our leaders pay a great deal of lip service to motions of justice and sacrifice. But if they had even a moderate regard for either of those concepts, who’s to say how many of our recent wars might have been avoided? In our “Pledge of Allegiance,” which most of us learned before we know anything about groupthink or psychological manipulation, we flatter our nation-state by calling it a land of liberty and justice for all. We may enjoy more freedoms equities than people living in other parts of the world, but if ours is a free country, it is, as Thoreau said of it, only “comparatively free” (5). Justice in America, as elsewhere in the world, appears to be more attractive in theory than in practice. And by that I am not only referring to criminal justice, but social, political and economic justice as well. Law and order, ostensibly the arm of justice, can all too often serve as a front for domination and coercion—a means of stifling dissent and protecting the status quo. “They want is kinder and gentler at their feet,” an Uncle Tupelo song says, and the laws are “made by men who bought and sold themselves” to a social order predicated on money and power (“Criminals”). In such a world, justice for all is a fantasy, and law and order is but a euphemism for the iron hand.

Our power brokers shamelessly preach what Lewis Lapham calls “the doctrine of American exceptionalism,” trite cajolery designed to win elections and solidify support for the prevailing order of things (38). It is not-very-ingenious Svengali act, and the lack of humanity implicit in the belief ought to be enough to give us pause. Exceptional people do not need to brag about their greatness. And it is important for Americans, as it is for everyone, to remember their own follies and transgressions, lest they repeat them. To be reminded of them, we need only look as far as the nearest clear-cutting operation, strip mine, Indian reservation, or African-American ghetto. United States history is as much a chronicle of conquest and ruination as it is a record of democracy’s fitful, sometimes graceless, and often bloody unfolding. To glorify and embrace that history full requires either profound naiveté or extreme chauvinism, neither of which is advisable.

“All you have to do is read George Bush’s favorite philosopher (Jesus),” says Naom Chomsky. “There’s a famous definition in the Gospels of the hypocrite, and the hypocrite is the person who refuses to apply himself the standards he applies to others...By that standard the entire commentary and discussion of the so-called War on Terror is pure hypocrisy, virtually without exception” (29).

More to the point, as Berry says, “All out military strength, all our pride, all our technologies and strategies of suspicion and surveillance cannot make us secure if we lose our ability to farm, if we squander our forests, or if we exhaust or poison our water sources” (*Citizenship Papers* 13). Even if our government had the moral authority to wage a “war on terrorism,” even if the US weren’t the only nation in the world to have been condemned by the World Court for international terrorism (Chomsky 50), it should not expect or be expected to rid the world of terrorists when it has failed even to take proper care of its own citizens and their habitat. Crushing every active terrorist cell in the world will not put an end to our health-care crisis, or rebuild our communities, or undo the environmental damage we have done. Our present way life is much greater threat to our freedom and security than Osama Bin Laden or the now-captured Saddam Hussein ever could be. The longer we take to recognize and address the real dangers we face, the harder it will be to make the changes necessary to save ourselves. If the outputting of generosity witnessed in the wake of September 11th were to become part of our national life, no doubt it would make for a truer and more lasting peace than our current imperialist adventure in Iraq will. “When things are smooth, nobody likes one another, they hate one another’s guts,” said the roots music master Clarence “Gatemouth” Brown in a post-

9/11 interview. “But when a crisis happens, everybody hugs one another with all this bullshit sympathy. I mean, why can’t you have respect and concern for each other before? It’s just like Christmas—from January to December, everybody is just on your own” (*No Depression* 58). The tendency in the face of inhumanity to become more cynical about human nature and the future of our species is understandable, but it remains a choice. “Be in nothing so moderate as love of man,” says the poet Robinson Jeffers (17), but love, not misanthropy, is the proper response to evil. “What we...need to worry about,” says Berry, “is the possibility that we will be reduced, in the face of the enormities of our time, to silence or to mere protest...If we would help if we could, we will help when we can” (*What Are People For?* 63). Indoctrinated and benumbed, too many of us have been convinced by those in power that we as individual citizens can’t make a difference. If that weren’t the case, Bush would never have been allowed to steal the presidency as easily as he did. But like most anything else the elites would have us believe, the notion that we can’t make a difference is a lie.

George Santayana called patriotism “the passion of fools and the most foolish of passions” (McCutcheon 423), and we haven’t done much lately to prove him wrong. But the blind loyalty to which I believe he was referring and real patriotism is not necessarily the same thing. “I want to be a citizen of the culture, of the nest the culture stands for, not of a nation or a party or economic system,” said the late Wallace Stegner (Hepworth 117), whose tough and thoughtful criticism of the rapacious society in which we live mark him in my mind—along with Thoreau, Abbey and Berry—as one of the true American patriots, men who have loved and defended their homelands with their words and in their way of life. Thomas Paine was a patriot. So was Crazy Horse. To my way thinking, the dissenters and resisters, not the robber barons masquerading as freedom lovers, have always represented the best the culture stands for. They understanding that the questioning of authority is not necessarily a repudiation of culture, tradition and community—the things that give meaning and context to our lives—but rather it can be and often is a defense of those things.

“The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be ad, and if I repent of anything it is very likely to be my good behavior,” says Thoreau (11). To allow oneself to be manipulated by the bombast and propaganda of a corrupt establishment, or by opinion polls, is a moral failure, not patriotism.

Evil and death will always be with us, and the best of our traditions are informed by an awareness of that reality. What John Steinbeck said of literature, that it “grew out of a human need for it” and “has not change

except to become more needed,” is true of the best of our cultural heritage. And if, as Steinbeck said, “the understanding and the resolution of fear are a large part of the writer’s reason for being,” then that is equally true of priests, teachers, parents and anyone else concerned with the fate of humankind (Elaine Steinbeck et al. 897-898).

“One ought, everyday at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture and speak a few reasonable words,” said Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. That, it seems to me, is as good a place as any to begin restoring balance and harmony in human endeavors. The outcome of the American experiment will be determined by our willingness or unwillingness to forsake the destruction of that which sustains us: family, community, our fellow creatures and the earth we share. If the senseless bloodshed of September 11th helped remind Americans of the things that are most precious to us, it follows that we ought to rededicate ourselves to the preservation of those things. An ever-expanding economy and high-tech weaponry won’t help us avert the next catastrophe—indeed, these are the very things that have subjugated us and made our annihilation possible—but a higher purpose might.

THE END

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