

## CHRIS HEDGES

Captain Ahab & U.S. Empire  
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The most prescient portrait of the American character and our ultimate fate as a species is found in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Melville makes our murderous obsessions, our hubris, violent impulses, moral weakness and inevitable self-destruction visible in his chronicle of a whaling voyage. He is our foremost oracle. He is to us what William Shakespeare was to Elizabethan England or Fyodor Dostoyevsky to czarist Russia.

Our country is given shape in the form of the ship, the Pequod, named after the Indian tribe exterminated in 1638 by the Puritans and their Native American allies. The ship's 30-man crew—there were 30 states in the Union when Melville wrote the novel—is a mixture of races and creeds. The object of the hunt is a massive white whale, Moby Dick, which in a previous encounter maimed the ship's captain, Ahab, by dismembering one of his legs. The self-destructive fury of the quest, much like that of the one we are on, assures the Pequod's destruction. And those on the ship, on some level, know they are doomed—just as many of us know that a consumer culture based on corporate profit, limitless exploitation and the continued extraction of fossil fuels is doomed.

"If I had been downright honest with myself," Ishmael admits, "I would have seen very plainly in my heart that I did but half fancy being committed this way to so long a voyage, without once laying my eyes on the man who was to be the absolute dictator of it, so soon as the ship sailed out upon the open sea. But when a man suspects any wrong, it sometimes happens that if he be already involved in the matter, he insensibly strives to cover up his suspicions even from himself. And much this way it was with me. I said nothing, and tried to think nothing."

Our financial system—like our participatory democracy—is a mirage. The Federal Reserve purchases \$85 billion in U.S. Treasury bonds—much of it worthless subprime mortgages—each month. It has been artificially propping up the government and Wall Street like this for five years. It has loaned trillions of dollars at virtually no interest to banks and firms that make money—because wages are kept low—by lending it to us at staggering interest rates that can climb to as high as 30 percent. Or our corporate oligarchs hoard the money or gamble with it in an overinflated stock market. Estimates put the looting

by banks and investment firms of the U.S. Treasury at between \$15 trillion and \$20 trillion. But none of us know. The figures are not public. And the reason this systematic looting will continue until collapse is that our economy would go into a tailspin without this giddy infusion of free cash.

The ecosystem is at the same time disintegrating. Scientists from the International Programme on the State of the Ocean, a few days ago, issued a new report that warned that the oceans are changing faster than anticipated and increasingly becoming inhospitable to life. The oceans, of course, have absorbed much of the excess CO<sub>2</sub> and heat from the atmosphere. This absorption is rapidly warming and acidifying ocean waters. This is compounded, the report noted, by increased levels of de-oxygenation from nutrient runoffs from farming and climate change. The scientists called these effects a "deadly trio" that when combined is creating changes in the seas that are unprecedented in the planet's history. This is their language, not mine. The scientists wrote that each of the earth's five known mass extinctions was preceded by at least one part of the "deadly trio"—acidification, warming and de-oxygenation. They warned that "the next mass extinction" of sea life is already under way, the first in some 55 million years. Or look at the recent research from the University of Hawaii that says global warming is now inevitable, it cannot be stopped but at best slowed, and that over the next 50 years the earth will heat up to levels that will make whole parts of the planet uninhabitable. Tens of millions of people will be displaced and millions of species will be threatened with extinction. The report casts doubt that cities on or near a coast such as New York or London will endure.

Yet we, like Ahab and his crew, rationalize our collective madness. All calls for prudence, for halting the march toward economic, political and environmental catastrophe, for sane limits on carbon emissions, are ignored or ridiculed. Even with the flashing red lights before us, the increased droughts, rapid melting of glaciers and Arctic ice, monster tornadoes, vast hurricanes, crop failures, floods, raging wildfires and soaring temperatures, we bow slavishly before hedonism and greed and the enticing illusion of limitless power, intelligence and prowess.

The corporate assault on culture, journalism, education, the arts and critical thinking has left those who speak this truth marginalized and ignored, frantic Cassandras who are viewed as slightly unhinged and depressingly apocalyptic. We are consumed by a mania for hope, which our corporate masters lavishly provide, at the expense of truth.

Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* holds that only a few people have the fortitude to look in times of distress into what he calls the molten pit of human reality. Most studiously ignore the pit. Artists and philosophers, for Nietzsche, are consumed, however, by an insatiable curiosity, a quest for truth and desire for meaning. They venture down into the bowels of the molten pit. They get as close as they can before the flames and heat drive them back. This intellectual and moral honesty, Nietzsche wrote, comes with a cost. Those singed by the fire of reality become “burnt children,” he wrote, eternal orphans in empires of illusion.

Decayed civilizations always make war on independent intellectual inquiry, art and culture for this reason. They do not want the masses to look into the pit. They condemn and vilify the “burnt people”—Noam Chomsky, Ralph Nader, Cornel West. They feed the human addiction for illusion, happiness and hope. They peddle the fantasy of eternal material progress. They urge us to build images of ourselves to worship. They insist—and this is the argument of globalization—that our voyage is, after all, decreed by natural law. We have surrendered our lives to corporate forces that ultimately serve systems of death. We ignore and belittle the cries of the burnt people. And, if we do not swiftly and radically reconfigure our relationship to each other and the ecosystem, microbes look set to inherit the earth.

Clive Hamilton in his *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change* describes a dark relief that comes from accepting that “catastrophic climate change is virtually certain.” This obliteration of “false hopes,” he says, requires an intellectual knowledge and an emotional knowledge. The first is attainable. The second, because it means that those we love, including our children, are almost certainly doomed to insecurity, misery and suffering within a few decades, if not a few years, is much harder to acquire. To emotionally accept impending disaster, to attain the gut-level understanding that the power elite will not respond rationally to the devastation of the ecosystem, is as difficult to accept as our own mortality. The most daunting existential struggle of our time is to ingest this awful truth—intellectually and emotionally—and rise up to resist the forces that are destroying us.

The human species, led by white Europeans and Euro-Americans, has been on a 500-year-long planet-wide rampage of conquering, plundering, looting, exploiting and polluting the earth—as well as killing the indigenous communities that stood in the way. But the game is up.

The technical and scientific forces that created a life of unparalleled luxury—as well as unrivaled military and economic power for a small, global elite—are the forces that now doom us. The mania for ceaseless economic expansion and exploitation has become a curse, a death sentence. But even as our economic and environmental systems unravel, after the hottest year (2012) in the contiguous 48 states since record keeping began 107 years ago, we lack the emotional and intellectual creativity to shut down the engine of global capitalism. We have bound ourselves to a doomsday machine that grinds forward.

Complex civilizations have a bad habit of ultimately destroying themselves. Anthropologists including Joseph Tainter in *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Charles L. Redman in *Human Impact on Ancient Environments* and Ronald Wright in *A Short History of Progress* have laid out the familiar patterns that lead to systems breakdown. The difference this time is that when we go down the whole planet will go with us. There will, with this final collapse, be no new lands left to exploit, no new civilizations to conquer, no new peoples to subjugate. The long struggle between the human species and the earth will conclude with the remnants of the human species learning a painful lesson about unrestrained greed, hubris and idolatry.

Collapse comes throughout human history to complex societies not long after they reach their period of greatest magnificence and prosperity.

“One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun,” Reinhold Niebuhr wrote.

That pattern holds good for a lot of societies, among them the ancient Maya and the Sumerians of what is now southern Iraq. There are many other examples, including smaller-scale societies such as Easter Island. The very things that cause societies to prosper in the short run, especially new ways to exploit the environment such as the invention of irrigation, lead to disaster in the long run because of unforeseen complications. This is what Ronald Wright in *A Short History of Progress* calls the “progress trap.” We have set in motion an industrial machine of such complexity and such dependence on expansion, Wright notes, that we do not know how to make do with less or move to a steady state in terms of our demands on nature.

And as the collapse becomes palpable, if human history is any guide, we, like past societies in distress, will retreat into what anthropologists call “crisis cults.” The powerlessness we will feel in the face of ecological and economic chaos will unleash further collective delusions, such as fundamentalist beliefs in a god or gods who will come back to earth and save us. The Christian right provides a haven for this escapism. These cults perform absurd rituals to make it all go away, giving rise to a

religiosity that peddles collective self-delusion and magical thinking. Crisis cults spread rapidly among Native American societies in the later part of the 19th century as the buffalo herds and the last remaining tribes were slaughtered. The Ghost Dance held out the hope that all the horrors of white civilization—the railroads, the murderous cavalry units, the timber merchants, the mine speculators, the hated tribal agencies, the barbed wire, the machine guns, even the white man himself—would disappear. And our psychological hard wiring is no different.

In our decline, hatred becomes our primary lust, our highest form of patriotism. We deploy vast resources to hunt down jihadists and terrorists, real and phantom. We destroy our civil society in the name of a war on terror. We persecute those, from Julian Assange to Chelsea Manning to Edward Snowden, who expose the dark machinations of power. We believe, because we have externalized evil, that we can purify the earth. And we are blind to the evil within us.

Melville's description of Ahab is a description of the bankers, corporate boards, politicians, television personalities and generals who through the power of propaganda fill our heads with seductive images of glory and lust for wealth and power. We are consumed with self-induced obsessions that spur us toward self-annihilation.

"All my means are sane," Ahab says, "my motive and my object mad."

Ahab, as the historian Richard Slotkin points out in his book *Regeneration Through Violence*, is "the true American hero, worthy to be captain of a ship whose 'wood could only be American.'"

Melville offers us a vision, one that D.H. Lawrence later understood, of the inevitable fatality of white civilization brought about by our ceaseless lust for material progress, imperial expansion, white supremacy and exploitation of nature.

Melville, who had been a sailor on clipper ships and whalers, was keenly aware that the wealth of industrialized societies was stolen by force from the wretched of the earth. All the authority figures on the ship are white men—Ahab, Starbuck, Flask and Stubb. The hard, dirty work, from harpooning to gutting the carcasses of the whales, is the task of the poor, mostly men of color. Melville saw how European plundering of indigenous cultures from the 16th to the 19th centuries, coupled with the use of African slaves as a workforce to replace the natives, was the engine that enriched Europe and the United States. The Spaniards' easy seizure of the Aztec and Inca gold following the massive die-off from smallpox and other diseases among native populations set in motion five centuries of unchecked economic and environmental plunder. Karl Marx and Adam Smith pointed to the huge influx of wealth from the Americas as having made possible the Industrial Revolution and

modern capitalism. The Industrial Revolution also equipped the industrialized state with technologically advanced weapons systems, turning us into the most efficient killers on the planet.

Ahab, when he first appears on the quarterdeck after being in his cabin for the first few days of the voyage, holds up a doubloon, an extravagant gold coin, and promises it to the crew member who first spots the white whale. He knows that "the permanent constitutional condition of the manufactured man ... is sordidness." And he plays to this sordidness. The whale becomes like everything in the capitalist world a commodity, a source of personal profit. A murderous greed, one that Starbuck, Ahab's first mate, denounces as "blasphemous," grips the crew. Ahab's obsession infects the ship.

"I see in Moby Dick outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it," Ahab tells Starbuck. "That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me."

Ahab conducts a dark Mass, a Eucharist of violence and blood, on the deck with the crew. He orders the men to circle around him. He makes them drink from a flagon that is passed from man to man, filled with draughts "hot as Satan's hoof." Ahab tells the harpooners to cross their lances before him. The captain grasps the harpoons and anoints the ships' harpooners—Queequeg, Tashtego and Daggoo—his "three pagan kinsmen." He orders them to detach the iron sections of their harpoons and fills the sockets "with the fiery waters from the pewter." "Drink, ye harpooners! Drink and swear, ye men that man the deathful whaleboat's bow—Death to Moby Dick! God hunt us all, if we do not hunt Moby Dick to his death!" And with the crew bonded to him in his infernal quest he knows that Starbuck is helpless "amid the general hurricane." "Starbuck now is mine," Ahab says, "cannot oppose me now, without rebellion." "The honest eye of Starbuck," Melville writes, "fell downright."

The ship, described as a hearse, was painted black. It was adorned with gruesome trophies of the hunt, festooned with the huge teeth and bones of sperm whales. It was, Melville writes, a "cannibal of a craft, tricking herself forth in the chased bones of her enemies." The fires used to melt the whale blubber at night turned the Pequod into a "red hell."

Our own raging fires, leaping up from our oil refineries and the explosions of our ordinance across the Middle East, bespeak our Stygian heart. And in our mad pursuit we ignore the suffering of others, just as Ahab does when he refuses to help the captain of a passing ship who is frantically searching for his son, who has fallen overboard.

Ahab has not only the heated rhetoric of persuasion; he is master of a terrifying internal security force on the ship, the five "dusky phantoms that seemed fresh formed

out of air.” Ahab’s secret, private whale boat crew, who emerge from the bowels of the ship well into the voyage, keeps the rest of the ship in abject submission. The art of propaganda and the use of brutal coercion, the mark of tyranny, define our lives just as they mark those on Melville’s ship. The novel is the chronicle of the last days of any civilization.

And yet Ahab is no simple tyrant. Melville toward the end of the novel gives us two glimpses into the internal battle between Ahab’s maniacal hubris and his humanity. Ahab, too, has a yearning for love. He harbors regrets over his deformed life. The black cabin boy Pip is the only crew member who evokes any tenderness in the captain. Ahab is aware of this tenderness. He fears its power. Pip functions as the Fool did in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Ahab warns Pip of Ahab. “Lad, lad,” says Ahab, “I tell thee thou must not follow Ahab now. The hour is coming when Ahab would not scare thee from him, yet would not have thee by him. There is that in thee, poor lad, which I feel too curing to my malady. Like cures like; and for this hunt, my malady becomes my most desired health. If thou speakest thus to me much more, Ahab’s purpose keels up in him. I tell thee no; it cannot be.” A few pages later, “untottering Ahab stood forth in the clearness of the morn; lifting his splintered helmet of a brow to the fair girl’s forehead of heaven. From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop.” Starbuck approaches him. Ahab, for the only time in the book, is vulnerable. He speaks to Starbuck of his “forty years on the pitiless sea! The desolation of solitude it has been. Why this strife of the chase? Why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? How the richer or better is Ahab now?” He thinks of his young wife—“I widowed that poor girl when I married her, Starbuck”—and of his little boy: “About this time—yes, it is his noon nap now—the boy vivaciously wakes; sits up in bed; and his mother tells him of me, of cannibal old me; how I am abroad upon the deep, but will yet come back to dance him again.”

Ahab’s thirst for dominance, vengeance and destruction, however, overpowers these faint regrets of lost love and thwarted compassion. Hatred wins. “What is it,” Ahab finally asks, “what nameless, inscrutable, unearthly thing is it; what cozening, hidden lord and master, and cruel, remorseless emperor commands me; that against all natural lovings and longings, I so keep pushing, and crowding, and jamming myself on all the time.”

Melville knew that physical courage and moral courage are distinct. One can be brave on a whaling ship or a battlefield, yet a coward when called on to stand up to human evil. Starbuck elucidates this peculiar division. The first mate is tormented by his complicity in what he foresees as Ahab’s “impious end.” Starbuck, “while generally abiding firm in the conflict with seas, or winds,

or whales, or any of the ordinary irrational horrors of the world, yet cannot withstand those more terrific, because spiritual terrors, which sometimes menace you from the concentrating brow of an enraged and mighty man.”

And so we plunge forward in our doomed quest to master the forces that will finally smite us. Those who see where we are going too often lack the fortitude to actually rebel. Mutiny was the only salvation for the Pequod’s crew. It is our only salvation. But moral cowardice turns us into hostages.

I am reading and rereading the debates among some of the great radical thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries about the mechanisms of social change. These debates were not academic. They were frantic searches for the triggers of revolt. Lenin placed his faith in a violent uprising, a professional, disciplined revolutionary vanguard freed from moral constraints and, like Marx, in the inevitable emergence of the worker’s state. Proudhon insisted that gradual change would be accomplished as enlightened workers took over production and educated and converted the rest of the proletariat. Bakunin predicted the catastrophic breakdown of the capitalist order, something we are likely to witness in our lifetimes, and new autonomous worker federations rising up out of the chaos. Kropotkin, like Proudhon, believed in an evolutionary process that would hammer out the new society. Emma Goldman, along with Kropotkin, came to be very wary of both the efficacy of violence and the revolutionary potential of the masses. “The mass,” Goldman wrote bitterly toward the end of her life in echoing Marx, “clings to its masters, loves the whip, and is the first to cry Crucify!”

The revolutionists of history counted on a mobilized base of enlightened industrial workers. The building blocks of revolt, they believed, relied on the tool of the general strike, the ability of workers to cripple the mechanisms of production. Strikes could be sustained with the support of political parties, strike funds and union halls. Workers without these support mechanisms had to replicate the infrastructure of parties and unions if they wanted to put prolonged pressure on the bosses and the state. But now, with the decimation of the U.S. manufacturing base, along with the dismantling of our unions and opposition parties, we will have to search for different instruments of rebellion.

We must develop a revolutionary theory that is not reliant on the industrial or agrarian muscle of workers. Most manufacturing jobs have disappeared, and, of those that remain, few are unionized. Our family farms have been destroyed by agro-businesses. Monsanto and its Faustian counterparts on Wall Street rule. They are steadily poisoning our lives and rendering us powerless. The corporate leviathan, which is global, is freed from the constraints of a single nation-state or government. Corporations are beyond regulation or control. Politicians are too anemic, or more often too corrupt, to stand in the

way of the accelerating corporate destruction. This makes our struggle different from revolutionary struggles in industrial societies in the past. Our revolt will look more like what erupted in the less industrialized Slavic republics, Russia, Spain and China and uprisings led by a disenfranchised rural and urban working class and peasantry in the liberation movements that swept through Africa and Latin America. The dispossessed working poor, along with unemployed college graduates and students, unemployed journalists, artists, lawyers and teachers, will form our movement. This is why the fight for a higher minimum wage is crucial to uniting service workers with the alienated college-educated sons and daughters of the old middle class. Bakunin, unlike Marx, considered *déclassé* intellectuals essential for successful revolt.

It is not the poor who make revolutions. It is those who conclude that they will not be able, as they once expected, to rise economically and socially. This consciousness is part of the self-knowledge of service workers and fast-food workers. It is grasped by the swelling population of college graduates caught in a vise of low-paying jobs and obscene amounts of debt. These two groups, once united, will be our primary engines of revolt. Much of the urban poor has been crippled and in many cases broken by a rewriting of laws, especially drug laws, that has permitted courts, probation officers, parole boards and police to randomly seize poor people of color, especially African-American men, without just cause and lock them in cages for years. In many of our most impoverished urban centers—our internal colonies, as Malcolm X called them—mobilization, at least at first, will be difficult. The urban poor are already in chains. These chains are being readied for the rest of us. “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids rich and poor alike to sleep under bridges, beg in the streets or steal bread,” Anatole France commented acidly.

Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan examined 100 years of violent and nonviolent resistance movements in their book *Why Civil Resistance Works*. They concluded that nonviolent movements succeed twice as often as violent uprisings. Violent movements work primarily in civil wars or in ending foreign occupations, they found. Nonviolent movements that succeed appeal to those within the power structure, especially the police and civil servants, who are cognizant of the corruption and decadence of the power elite and are willing to abandon them. And we only need 1 to 5 percent of the population actively working for the overthrow of a system, history has shown, to bring down even the most ruthless totalitarian structures. It always works on two tracks—building alternative structures such as public banks to free ourselves from control and finding mechanisms to halt the machine.

The most important dilemma facing us is not ideological. It is logistical. The security and surveillance

state has made its highest priority the breaking of any infrastructure that might spark widespread revolt. The state knows the tinder is there. It knows that the continued unraveling of the economy and the effects of climate change make popular unrest inevitable. It knows that as underemployment and unemployment doom at least a quarter of the U.S. population, perhaps more, to perpetual poverty, and as unemployment benefits are scaled back, as schools close, as the middle class withers away, as pension funds are looted by hedge fund thieves, and as the government continues to let the fossil fuel industry ravage the planet, the future will increasingly be one of open conflict. This battle against the corporate state, right now, is primarily about infrastructure. We need an infrastructure to build revolt. The corporate state is determined to deny us one.

The state, in its internal projections, has a vision of the future that is as dystopian as mine. But the state, to protect itself, lies. Politicians, corporations, the public relations industry, the entertainment industry and our ridiculous television pundits speak as if we can continue to build a society based on limitless growth, profligate consumption and fossil fuel. They feed the collective mania for hope at the expense of truth. Their public vision is self-delusional, a form of collective psychosis. The corporate state, meanwhile, is preparing privately for the world it knows is actually coming. It is cementing into place a police state, one that includes the complete evisceration of our most basic civil liberties and the militarization of the internal security apparatus, as well as wholesale surveillance of the citizenry.

Moby Dick rams and sinks the Pequod. The waves swallow up Ahab.

As the planet begins to convulse with fury, as the senseless greed of limitless capitalist expansion implodes the global economy, as our civil liberties are eviscerated in the name of national security, shackling us to an interconnected security and surveillance state that stretches from Moscow to Istanbul to New York, how shall we endure and resist?

Our hope lies in the human imagination. It was the human imagination that permitted African-Americans during slavery and the Jim Crow era to transcend their physical condition. It was the human imagination that sustained Sitting Bull and Black Elk as their land was seized and their cultures were broken. And it was the human imagination that allowed the survivors in the Nazi death camps to retain the power of the sacred. It is the imagination that makes possible transcendence. Chants, work songs, spirituals, the blues, poetry, dance and art converged under slavery to nourish and sustain this imagination. These were the forces that, as Ralph Ellison wrote, “we had in place of freedom.” The oppressed would be the first—for they know their fate—to admit that on a rational level such a notion is absurd, but they also know that it is only through the imagination that they

survive. Jewish inmates in Auschwitz reportedly put God on trial for the Holocaust and then condemned God to death. A rabbi stood after the verdict to lead the evening prayers.

African-Americans and Native Americans, for centuries, had little control over their destinies. Forces of bigotry and violence kept them subjugated by whites. Suffering, for the oppressed, was tangible. Death was a constant companion. And it was only their imagination, as William Faulkner noted at the end of *The Sound and the Fury*, that permitted them—unlike the novel’s white Compson family—to “endure.”

The theologian James H. Cone captures this in his book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Cone says that for oppressed blacks the cross was a “paradoxical religious symbol because it inverts the world’s value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be first and the first last.”

Cone continues: That God could “make a way out of no way” in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect, yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk. Enslaved blacks who first heard the gospel message seized on the power of the cross. Christ crucified manifested God’s loving and liberating presence in the contradictions of black life—that transcendent presence in the lives of black Christians that empowered them to believe that ultimately, in God’s eschatological future, they would not be defeated by the “troubles of this world,” no matter how great and painful their suffering. Believing this paradox, this absurd claim of faith, was only possible in humility and repentance. There was no place for the proud and the mighty, for people who think that God called them to rule over others. The cross was God’s critique of power—white power—with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.

Reinhold Niebuhr labeled this capacity to defy the forces of repression “a sublime madness in the soul.” Niebuhr wrote that “nothing but madness will do battle with malignant power and ‘spiritual wickedness in high places.’” This sublime madness, as Niebuhr understood, is dangerous, but it is vital. Without it, “truth is obscured.” And Niebuhr also knew that traditional liberalism was a useless force in moments of extremity. Liberalism, Niebuhr said, “lacks the spirit of enthusiasm, not to say fanaticism, which is so necessary to move the world out of its beaten tracks. It is too intellectual and too little emotional to be an efficient force in history.”

The prophets in the Hebrew Bible had this sublime madness. The words of the Hebrew prophets, as Abraham Heschel wrote, were “a scream in the night. While the world is at ease and asleep, the prophet feels the blast from heaven.” The prophet, because he saw and faced an unpleasant reality, was, as Heschel wrote, “compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected.”

The poet Leon Staff wrote from the Warsaw ghetto:

“Even more than bread we now need poetry, in a time when it seems that it is not needed at all.”

It is only those who harness their imagination, and through their imagination find the courage to peer into the molten pit, who can minister to the suffering of those around them. It is only they who can find the physical and psychological strength to resist. Resistance is carried out not for its success, but because by resisting in every way possible we affirm life. And those who resist in the years ahead will be those who are infected with this “sublime madness.” As Hannah Arendt wrote in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the only morally reliable people are not those who say “this is wrong” or “this should not be done,” but those who say “I can’t.” They know that as Immanuel Kant wrote: “If justice perishes, human life on earth has lost its meaning.” And this means that, like Socrates, we must come to a place where it is better to suffer wrong than to do wrong. We must at once see and act, and given what it means to see, this will require the surmounting of despair, not by reason, but by faith.

“One of the only coherent philosophical positions is revolt,” Camus wrote. “It is a constant confrontation between man and his obscurity. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”

“The people noticed that Crazy Horse was queerer than ever,” Black Elk said in remembering the final days of the wars of Western expansion. He went on to say of the great Sioux warrior: “He hardly ever stayed in the camp. People would find him out alone in the cold, and they would ask him to come home with them. He would not come, but sometimes he would tell the people what to do. People wondered if he ate anything at all. Once my father found him out alone like that, and he said to my father: ‘Uncle, you have noticed me the way I act. But do not worry; there are caves and holes for me to live in, and out here the spirits may help me. I am making plans for the good of my people.’”

Homer, Dante, Beethoven, Melville, Dostoevsky, Proust, Joyce, W.H. Auden, Emily Dickinson and James Baldwin, along with artists such as the sculptor David Smith, the photographer Diane Arbus and the blues musician Charley Patton, all had it. It is the sublime madness that lets one sing, as bluesman Ishman Bracey did in Hinds County, Miss., “I’ve been down so long, Lawd, down don’t worry me.” And yet in the mists of the imagination also lie the absurdity and certainty of divine justice:

I feel my hell a-risin’, a-risin’ every day;  
I feel my hell a-risin’, a-risin’ every day;  
Someday it’ll burst this levee and wash the whole  
wide world away.

Shakespeare’s greatest heroes and heroines—Prospero, Antony, Juliet, Viola, Rosalind, Hamlet, Cordelia and Lear—all have this sublime madness. King

Lear, who through suffering and affliction, through human imagination, is finally able to see, warns us all that unbridled human passion and unchecked hubris mean the suicide of the species. “It will come,” Albany says in *King Lear*. “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, Like monsters of the deep.”

It was the poems of Federico Garcia Lorca that sustained the republicans fighting the fascists in Spain. Music, dance, drama, art, song, painting have been the fire and drive of resistance movements. The rebel units in El Salvador when I covered the war there always traveled with musicians and theater troupes. Art, as Emma Goldman pointed out, has the power to make ideas felt. Goldman noted that when Andrew Undershaft, a character in George Bernard Shaw’s play *Major Barbara*, said poverty is “[t]he worst of crimes” and “All the other crimes are virtues beside it,” his impassioned declaration elucidated the cruelty of class warfare more effectively than Shaw’s socialist tracts. The degradation of education into vocational training for the corporate state, the ending of state subsidies for the arts and journalism, the hijacking of these disciplines by corporate sponsors, sever the population from understanding, self-actualization and transcendence. In aesthetic terms the corporate state seeks to crush beauty, truth and imagination. This is a war waged by all totalitarian systems.

Culture, real culture, is radical and transformative. It is capable of expressing what lies deep within us. It gives words to our reality. It makes us feel as well as see. It allows us to empathize with those who are different or oppressed. It reveals what is happening around us. It honors mystery. “The role of the artist, then, precisely, is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through the vast forest,” James Baldwin wrote, “so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.”

“Ultimately, the artist and the revolutionary function as they function, and pay whatever dues they must pay behind it because they are both possessed by a vision, and they do not so much follow this vision as find themselves driven by it,” wrote Baldwin. “Otherwise, they could never endure, much less embrace, the lives they are compelled to lead.”

I do not know if we can build a better society. I do not even know if we will survive as a species. But I know these corporate forces have us by the throat. And they have my children by the throat. I do not fight fascists because I will win. I fight fascists because they are fascists. And this is a fight, which, in the face of the overwhelming forces against us, requires us to embrace this sublime madness, to find in acts of rebellion the embers of life, an intrinsic meaning that lies outside of certain success. It is to at once grasp reality and then refuse to allow this reality to paralyze us. It is, and I say this to people of all creeds or no creeds, to make an absurd leap of faith, to believe, despite all empirical evidence

around us, that good always draws to it the good, that the fight for life always goes somewhere—we do not know where; the Buddhists call it karma—and in these acts we sustain our belief in a better world, even if we cannot see one emerging around us.

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