

## Premises

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**PREMISE ONE:** Civilization is not and can never be sustainable. This is especially true for industrial civilization.

**PREMISE TWO:** Traditional communities do not often voluntarily give up or sell the resources on which their communities are based until their communities have been destroyed. They also do not willingly allow their landbases to be damaged so that other resources—gold, oil, and so on—can be extracted. It follows that those who want the resources will do what they can to destroy traditional communities.

**PREMISE THREE:** Our way of living—industrial civilization—is based on, requires, and would collapse very quickly without persistent and widespread violence.

**PREMISE FOUR:** Civilization is based on a clearly defined and widely accepted yet often unarticulated hierarchy. Violence done by those higher on the hierarchy to those lower is nearly always invisible, that is, unnoticed. When it is noticed, it is fully rationalized. Violence done by those lower on the hierarchy to those higher is unthinkable, and when it does occur is regarded with shock, horror, and the fetishization of the victims.

**PREMISE FIVE:** The property of those higher on the hierarchy is more valuable than the lives of those below. It is acceptable for those above to increase the amount of property they control—in everyday language, to make money—by destroying or taking the lives of those below. This is called *production*. If those below damage the property of those above, those above may kill or otherwise destroy the lives of those below. This is called *justice*.

**PREMISE SIX:** Civilization is not redeemable. This culture will not undergo any sort of voluntary transformation to a sane and sustainable way of living. If we do not put a halt to it, civilization will continue to immiserate the vast majority of humans and to degrade the planet until it (civilization, and probably the

planet) collapses. The effects of this degradation will continue to harm humans and nonhumans for a very long time.

**PREMISE SEVEN:** The longer we wait for civilization to crash—or the longer we wait before we ourselves bring it down—the messier the crash will be, and the worse things will be for those humans and nonhumans who live during it, and for those who come after.

**PREMISE EIGHT:** The needs of the natural world are more important than the needs of the economic system.

Another way to put Premise Eight: Any economic or social system that does not benefit the natural communities on which it is based is unsustainable, immoral, and stupid. Sustainability, morality, and intelligence (as well as justice) require the dismantling of any such economic or social system, or at the very least disallowing it from damaging your landbase.

**PREMISE NINE:** Although there will clearly someday be far fewer humans than there are at present, there are many ways this reduction in population may occur (or be achieved, depending on the passivity or activity with which we choose to approach this transformation). Some will be characterized by extreme violence and privation: nuclear Armageddon, for example, would reduce both population and consumption, yet do so horrifically; the same would be true for a continuation of overshoot, followed by a crash. Other ways could be characterized by less violence. Given the current levels of violence by this culture against both humans and the natural world, however, it's not possible to speak of reductions in population and consumption that do not involve violence and privation, not because the reductions themselves would necessarily involve violence, but because violence and privation have become the default of our culture. Yet some ways of reducing population and consumption, while still violent, would *consist* of decreasing the current levels of violence—required and caused by the (often forced) movement of resources from the poor to the rich—and would of course be marked by a reduction in current violence against the natural world. Personally and collectively we may be able to both reduce the amount and soften the character of violence that occurs during this ongoing and perhaps long-term shift. Or we may not. But this much is certain: if we do not approach it actively—if we do not talk about our predicament and what we are going to do about it—the violence will almost undoubtedly be far more severe, the privation more extreme.

**PREMISE TEN:** The culture as a whole and most of its members are insane. The culture is driven by a death urge, an urge to destroy life.

**PREMISE ELEVEN:** From the beginning, this culture—civilization—has been a culture of occupation.

**PREMISE TWELVE:** There are no rich people in the world, and there are no poor people. There are just people. The rich may have lots of pieces of green paper that many pretend are worth something—or their presumed riches may be even more abstract: numbers on hard drives at banks—and the poor may not. These “rich” claim they own land, and the “poor” are often denied the right to make that same claim. A primary purpose of the police is to enforce the delusions of those with lots of pieces of green paper. Those without the green papers generally buy into these delusions almost as quickly and completely as those with. These delusions carry with them extreme consequences in the real world.

**PREMISE THIRTEEN:** Those in power rule by force, and the sooner we break ourselves of illusions to the contrary, the sooner we can at least begin to make reasonable decisions about whether, when, and how we are going to resist.

**PREMISE FOURTEEN:** From birth on—and probably from conception, but I’m not sure how I’d make the case—we are individually and collectively enculturated to hate life, hate the natural world, hate the wild, hate wild animals, hate women, hate children, hate our bodies, hate and fear our emotions, hate ourselves. If we did not hate the world, we could not allow it to be destroyed before our eyes. If we did not hate ourselves, we could not allow our homes—and our bodies—to be poisoned.

**PREMISE FIFTEEN:** Love does not imply pacifism.

**PREMISE SIXTEEN:** The material world is primary. This does not mean that the spirit does not exist, nor that the material world is all there is. It means that spirit mixes with flesh. It means also that real world actions have real world consequences. It means we cannot rely on Jesus, Santa Claus, the Great Mother, or even the Easter Bunny to get us out of this mess. It means this mess really is a mess, and not just the movement of God’s eyebrows. It means we have to face this mess ourselves. It means that for the time we are here on Earth—whether or not we end up somewhere else after we die, and whether we are condemned

or privileged to live here—the Earth is the point. It is primary. It is our home. It is everything. It is silly to think or act or be as though this world is not real and primary. It is silly and pathetic to not live our lives as though our lives are real.

**PREMISE SEVENTEEN:** It is a mistake (or more likely, denial) to base our decisions on whether actions arising from them will or won't frighten fence-sitters, or the mass of Americans.

**PREMISE EIGHTEEN:** Our current sense of self is no more sustainable than our current use of energy or technology.

**PREMISE NINETEEN:** The culture's problem lies above all in the belief that controlling and abusing the natural world is justifiable.


**PREMISE TWENTY:** Within this culture, economics—not community well-being, not morals, not ethics, not justice, not life itself—drives social decisions.

Modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are determined primarily (and often exclusively) on the basis of whether these decisions will increase the monetary fortunes of the decision-makers and those they serve.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are determined primarily (and often exclusively) on the basis of whether these decisions will increase the power of the decision-makers and those they serve.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: Social decisions are founded primarily (and often exclusively) on the almost entirely unexamined belief that the decision-makers and those they serve are entitled to magnify their power and/or financial fortunes at the expense of those below.

Re-modification of Premise Twenty: If you dig to the heart of it—if there is any heart left—you will find that social decisions are determined primarily on the basis of how well these decisions serve the ends of controlling or destroying wild nature.



We have spent too much time in thinking, supposing that if we weigh in advance the possibilities of any action, it will happen automatically. We have learnt, rather too late, that action comes not from thought, but from a readiness for responsibility.

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer, written while in prison  
for resisting the Nazis<sup>1</sup>*

Cowardice asks the question, "Is it safe?" Expediency asks the question, "Is it politic?" And Vanity comes along and asks the question, "Is it popular?" But Conscience asks the question, "Is it right?" And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must do it because Conscience tells him it is right.

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

IT ISN'T MERELY FALSE HOPES THAT KEEP THOSE WHO GO ALONG ENCHAINED.  
It is hope itself.

Hope, we are told, is our beacon in the dark. It is our light at the end of a long, dark tunnel. It is the beam of light that against all odds makes its way into our prison cells. It is our reason for persevering, our protection against despair (which must at all costs, including the cost of our sanity and the world, be avoided). How can we continue if we do not have hope?

We've all been taught that hope in some better future condition—like hope in some better future heaven—is and must be our refuge in current sorrow. I'm sure you remember the story of Pandora. She was given a tightly sealed box and was told never to open it. But, curious, she did, and out flew plagues, sorrow, and mischief, probably not in that order. Too late she clamped down the lid. Only one thing remained in the box: hope. Hope, the story goes, was “the only good the casket held among the many evils, and it remains to this day mankind's sole comfort in misfortune.” No mention here of action being a comfort in misfortune, or of actually *doing something* to alleviate or eliminate one's misfortune. (*Fortune*: from Latin *fortuna*, akin to Latin *fort-*, *fors*, chance, luck: this implies of course that the misfortune that hope is supposed to comfort us in is just damn bad luck, and not dependent on circumstances we can change: in the present case, I don't see how bad luck is involved in the wretched choices we each make daily in allowing civilization to continue to destroy the earth.)

The more I understand hope, the more I realize that instead of hope being a comfort, that all along it deserved to be in the box with the plagues, sorrow, and mischief; that it serves the needs of those in power as surely as a belief in a distant heaven; that hope is really nothing more than a secular version of the same old heaven/nirvana mindfuck.

Hope is, in fact, a curse, a bane.

I say this not only because of the lovely Buddhist saying, “Hope and fear chase each other's tails”—without hope there is no fear—not only because hope leads us away from the present, away from who and where we are right now and toward some imaginary future state. I say this because of *what hope is*.

More or less all of us yammer on more or less endlessly about hope. You wouldn't believe—or maybe you would—how many editors for how many

magazines have said they want me to write about the apocalypse, then enjoined me to “make sure you leave readers with a sense of hope.” But what, precisely, is hope? At a talk I gave last spring, someone asked me to define it. I couldn’t, and so turned the question back on the audience. Here’s the definition we all came up with: Hope is a longing for a future condition over which you have no agency. It means you are essentially powerless.

Think about it. I’m not, for example, going to say I hope I eat something tomorrow. I’ll just do it. I don’t hope I take another breath right now, nor that I finish writing this sentence. I just do them.<sup>313</sup> On the other hand, I hope that the next time I get on a plane, it doesn’t crash.<sup>314</sup> To hope for some result means you have no agency concerning it.

So many people say they hope the dominant culture stops destroying the world. By saying that, they’ve guaranteed at least its short-term continuation, and given it a power it doesn’t have. They’ve also stepped away from their own power.

I do not hope coho salmon survive. I will do what it takes to make sure the dominant culture doesn’t drive them extinct. If coho want to leave because they don’t like how they’re being treated—and who could blame them?—I will say good-bye, and I will miss them, but if they do not want to leave, I will not allow civilization to kill them off. *I will do whatever it takes.*

I do not hope civilization comes down sooner rather than later. I will do what it takes to bring that about.

When we realize the degree of agency we actually do have, we no longer have to “hope” at all. We simply do the work. We make sure salmon survive. We make sure prairie dogs survive. We make sure tigers survive. We do whatever it takes.

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Casey Maddox wrote that when philosophy dies, action begins. I would say in addition that when we stop hoping for external assistance, when we stop hoping that the awful situation we’re in will somehow resolve itself, when we stop hoping the situation will somehow not get worse, then we are finally free—truly free—to honestly start working to thoroughly resolve it. I would say when hope dies, action begins.

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Hope may be fine—and adaptive—for prisoners, but free men and women don't need it.

Are you a prisoner, or are you free?



People sometimes ask me, "If things are so bad, why don't you just kill yourself?"

The answer is that life is really, really good. I am a complex enough being that I can hold in my heart the understanding that we are really, really fucked, and at the same time the understanding that life is really, really good. Not because we're fucked, obviously, nor because of the things that are causing us to be fucked, but despite all that. We are fucked. Life is still good. We are really fucked. Life is still really good. We are *so* fucked. Life is still *so* good.

Many people are afraid to feel despair. They fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate is our situation, they must then be perpetually miserable. They forget it is possible to feel many things at once. I am full of rage, sorrow, joy, love, hate, despair, happiness, satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and a thousand other feelings. They also forget that despair is an entirely appropriate response to a desperate situation. Many people probably also fear that if they allow themselves to perceive how desperate things are that they may be forced to actually *do something* to change their circumstances.

Despair or no, life is good. The other day I was lying by the pond outside my home, looking up through redwood needles made translucent by the sun. I was happy, and I thought, "What more could anyone want?"<sup>315</sup> Life is so good. And that's all the more reason to fight.

Another question people sometimes ask is, "If things are so bad, why don't you just party?"

Well, the first answer is that I don't really like parties. The second is that I'm having great fun. I love my life. I love life. This is true for most activists I know. We are doing what we love, fighting for what and whom we love.

I have no patience for those who use our desperate situation as an excuse for inaction.<sup>316</sup> I've learned that if you deprive most of these people of that particular excuse they just find another, then another, then another. The use of this excuse to justify their inaction—the use of any excuse to justify inaction—reveals nothing more nor less than an incapacity to love.

At one of my recent talks someone stood up during the Q & A and announced that the only reason people ever become activists is to make themselves feel better about themselves. Effectiveness really doesn't matter, he said,



and it's egotistical to think it does. He trotted out the old line about how the natural world doesn't need our help. At least he averred that the natural world exists, as opposed to being the movement of some god's eyebrows, but the end result was the same old narcissism.

I told him I disagreed.

He asked, "Doesn't activism make you feel good?"

"Of course, but that's not why I do it. If I only want to feel good, I can just masturbate. But I want to accomplish something in the real world."

"Why?"

"Because I'm in love. With salmon, with trees outside my window, with baby lampreys living in sandy stream bottoms, with slender salamanders crawling through the duff. And if you love, you act to defend your beloved. Of course results matter to you, but they don't matter to whether you make the effort. You don't simply hope your beloved survives and thrives. You do what it takes. If my love doesn't cause me to protect those I love, it's not love. And if I don't act to protect my landbase, I'm not fully human."

A while back I got an email from someone in Spokane, Washington. He said his fifteen-year-old son was wonderfully active in the struggle for ecological and social sanity. But, the father continued, "I want to make sure he stays active, so I feel the need to give him hope. This is a problem, because I don't feel any hope myself, and I don't want to lie to him."

I told him not to lie, and said if he wants his son to stay active, he shouldn't try to give him hope, but instead to give him love. If his son learns how to love, he will stay active.

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A wonderful thing happens when you give up on hope, which is that you realize you never needed it in the first place.<sup>317</sup> You realize that giving up on hope didn't kill you, nor did it make you less effective. In fact it made you more effective, because you ceased relying on someone or something else to solve your problems—you ceased *hoping* your problems somehow get solved, through the magical assistance of God, the Great Mother, the Sierra Club, valiant tree-sitters, brave salmon, or even the Earth itself—and you just began doing what's necessary to solve your problems yourself.

Because of industrial civilization, human sperm counts have been cut in half over the last fifty years. At the same time, girls have begun to enter puberty earlier: 1 percent of three-year-old girls have begun to develop breasts or pubic

hair, and in only the last six years, the percentage of girls under eight with swollen breasts or pubic hair has gone from 1 percent to 6.7 percent for white girls, and 27.2 percent for black girls.<sup>318</sup>

What are you going to do about this? Are you going to hope this problem somehow goes away? Will you hope someone magically solves it? Will you hope someone—anyone—will stop the chemical industry from killing us all?

Or will you do something about it?

When you give up on hope, something even better happens than it not killing you, which is that it kills you. You die. And there's a wonderful thing about being dead, which is that once you're dead they—those in power—cannot really touch you anymore. Not through promises, not through threats, not through violence itself. Once you're dead in this way, you can still sing, you can still dance, you can still make love, you can still fight like hell—you can still *live* because *you are* still alive, in fact more alive than ever before—but those in power no longer have a hold on you. You come to realize that when hope died, the you who died with the hope was not you, but was the you who depended on those who exploit you, the you who believed that those who exploit you will somehow stop on their own, the you who depended on and believed in the mythologies propagated by those who exploit you to facilitate that exploitation. The socially constructed you died. The civilized you died. The manufactured, fabricated, stamped, molded you died. The victim died.

And who is left when that you dies? You are left. Animal you. Naked you. Vulnerable (and invulnerable) you. Mortal you. Survivor you. The you who thinks not what the culture taught you to think, but what you think. The you who feels not what the culture taught you to feel but what you feel. The you who is not who the culture taught you to be but who you are. The you who can say yes, the you who can say no. The you who is a part of the land where you live. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend your family. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend the others you love. The you who will fight (or won't) to defend the land upon which your life and the lives of those you love depend. The you whose morality is not based on what you have been taught by the culture that is killing the planet, killing you,<sup>319</sup> but on your own animal feelings of love and connection to your family, your friends, your landbase. Not to your family as self-identified civilized beings but as animals who require a landbase, animals who are being killed by chemicals, animals who have been formed and deformed to fit the needs of the culture.

When you give up on hope—when you are dead in this way, and by being so are really alive—you make yourself no longer vulnerable to the co-optation of

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rationality and of fear that Nazis perpetrated on Jews and others, that abusers perpetrate on their victims, that the dominant culture perpetrates on all of us. Or rather it is the case that the exploiters frame physical, social, and emotional circumstances such that victims perceive themselves as having no choice but to perpetrate this co-optation on themselves. But when you give up on hope, this exploiter/victim relationship is broken. You become like those Jews who participated in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

When you give up on hope, you lose a lot of fear. And when you quit relying on hope, and instead begin to just protect those you love, you become dangerous indeed to those in power.

In case you're wondering, that's a very good thing.



I'm talking to a friend, an ex-con, who says he thinks revolutions only take place when some critical mass of people get to what he calls the "fuck it" point: the point where things are so bad that people are finally ready to just say *fuck it* and do what needs to be done.

I can't say I disagree.

It reminds me of a talk I gave a few months ago. I spoke of how so many of my students at the prison fully recognized civilization's destructiveness and were ready to bring it all down. Afterwards someone from the audience stood and said that he was a public defender, and that his experience with his clients was radically different. They did not, he said, want to bring it all down. They merely wanted a bigger piece of the capitalist pie.

What he said struck me immediately as true. But I did not know how to merge that truth with what my former students had told me. Later that night a friend made it clear: the public defender and I were dealing with people who were at different parts of the process of being eaten by the state. The people he worked with had merely been arrested. Perhaps some still thought the system was fair. Perhaps others thought they could beat the system. Perhaps still others hoped merely that the system would not destroy them. None of them had yet reached the "fuck it" point. My students, on the other hand, were at a maximum security prison, many for the rest of their lives. There was no longer any reason for them to believe in the system. They had nothing left to lose.



We know what those in power do to those who threaten that power. Jeffrey Leuers burned three SUVs in an act of symbolic resistance, and was sentenced to more than twenty-two years in prison, a far longer sentence than that given to rapists, to men who beat their wives to death, to chemical company CEOs who give so many of us cancer. If we were to seriously threaten the perceived entitlement of those in power to convert the living world into consumer products to be sold, they would kill us.

I don't particularly want to die. I love living, and I love my life. But I'll tell you something that helped me lose at least some of the fear I have that those in power will kill me if I threaten their perceived entitlement to destroy the planet. I asked myself: What's the worst they can do to me? Effectively, the worst they can do is kill me. Yes, they can torture me—as they do to so many—or they can put me in solitary confinement in a tiny box—as they also do to so many—but I would hope (there's that word) that in those cases I'd be able to kill myself if necessary. Well, so far as I can figure, if they kill me, most probably one of three things will happen. One possibility is that when we die, it's "boom, boom, out go the lights," in which case I'll just be dead, and I won't know anything anyway. Another possibility is that after we die we go "somewhere else," whatever that means, in which case I'll just keep fighting them from there. And a third possibility is that after we die we get reincarnated. If that happens, I'll follow the lead of the eighteen-year-old Indian Kartar Singh (Sardar Kartar Singh Saraba, or sometimes Shaheed Kartar Singh Saraba) who fought to drive the British from his home, and who in 1915 was betrayed and caught. When the magistrate overseeing the case was about to choose whether to hang him or imprison him for life, Kartar Singh stated: "I wish that I may be sentenced to death, and not life imprisonment, so that after re-birth, I may endeavour to get rid of the slavery imposed by the whites. If I am born as a female, I shall bear lion-hearted sons, and engage them in blowing to bits the British rulers."<sup>320</sup>

The court decided he was too dangerous to be allowed to live.

I hope he came back to fight again.



The man from the EPA continued, "I'm glad you're not a pacifist. I'm peace-loving myself, but have long studied martial arts. I don't consider this a contradiction. Sometimes danger is a form of protection. There's a reason that even peaceful wild things are born with thorns and claws. The real questions are: how and when you should 'open the can of whoop ass' (that's redneck talk).

"I'm glad that you're willing to eat meat yet you question how meat is produced. This is a very important distinction. I wrote a discharge permit for one of the largest slaughterhouses in the world. Five thousand cows per day, plus processing of meat from the equivalent of five thousand cows per day killed in off-site slaughterhouses. That's a lot of slaughter. Pollution output like a big city. This is the most economically efficient production of meat the world has ever seen, but highly polluting and unconscionably cruel. I believe it hurts us as a people to allow this cruelty to animals, and it hurts our souls to pretend meat is raised in some peaceful rural barnyard.

"You mentioned that you thought that things might go with a Bang. Since 9/11, I have been working on security issues, vulnerability assessments, response plans, etc. I know a bit about these matters and agree that there is a very real possibility of use of "weapons of mass destruction" by the U.S. or others. My pet theory, however, is not a bang, but a whimper. As you said, the gasoline party is over. We've passed the halfway mark of mineable petroleum supply, and the last half will be harder to extract economically than the first half. (Old Jed won't find more bubbling crude without high tech equipment and expensive extraction methods.)

"Meanwhile, world consumption is growing.

"As oil, water, and key minerals go into shorter supply, the slow squeeze will begin. Power structures, political and otherwise, need power to stay in power. It's hard to run an Empire on an empty tank, and the political/economic powerhouses could find themselves coughing to a stop in some very bad neighborhoods. That is happening now.

"In the twilight of a civilization, the state of emergency or crisis can last a century. There will be key watershed events within that cycle, but in terms of human experience, this cycle is evolutionary, punctuated by big scary events. Sort of like low-level warfare. Actually, it is characterized by low-level warfare. I believe we're at the point of key events in this cycle. Our collective decisions are critically important right now. I am saddened that we're so collectively asleep at the wheel, so enamored with the trivial and our trinkets.

"When I look at key points of crux, I think they focus around energy, water, and food. Gee that was hard: DUH! . . . The basics. The world industrial complex is geared up for overproduction, just as some key resources become scarce. When hungry people are overproducing widgets, while rich people go in debt to overconsume widgets, this will produce unexpected feasts and famines. We can expect more surprises from the energy sector. Infrastructure can be a very fragile thing if not actively maintained and sustained. Our dependence on

genetically altered monoculture for food crops and animals sets us up for rapid spread of disease. There is a looming Dust Bowl (overgrazing) in China, which will greatly disrupt domestic food production, and this will spread ripples in the pond. We have rolled our own tit into this wringer. You are right: we are really FUCKED . . .

“I noted that some people were very disturbed by the fact that you consider some form of societal collapse is imminent. (‘I’m twenty, I want a life, what do I do?’) That one surprised me: I realized that I have considered societal crisis as an ongoing given, while others have not. Again, this as an evolving process, which will have flashpoints and key moments of decision.

“There is a way out, but it requires a certain minimum level of focus and engagement from the larger public. Unfortunately, the Bread and Circuses have paid off for Korporate Amerika. Most people are fairly satiated and numb, and they don’t have a place to put that vague gnosis of getting screwed. If something happened and the bulb switched on, we could use our remaining wealth as seed money. I wouldn’t mind a little Utopian thinking if it were practical and focused, with a vision of a minimized ecological footprint. If we don’t embrace that little downgrade of lifestyle now, we will pay dearly, and not that far down the road. I suspect that the downgrade will be forced upon us by the slow squeeze of economic downturn, etc.

“I think folks missed your message of healing. You managed to cry it through. Wish I did that more. You are right: Life is Wonderful, friends are loving, and there is a group of people who are ‘getting it.’ I am blessed with an occupation that allows me to push in the right directions, a wonderful son, good friends, a herd of nice old bonsai trees, and a bumper crop of watermelons. Lately, my relationships have been deeper than I thought possible. I’m rethinking things. My deepest wishes are changing. All of these are good reasons to stop the Pollyanna routine and get a little busy . . . Nothing wrong with being a mean old protective Earth Daddy. After all, a real good dog knows who to bite.”

IN THE LAST 24 HOURS, OVER 200,000 ACRES OF RAINFOREST WERE destroyed. Thirteen million tons of toxic chemicals were released. Forty-five thousand people died of starvation, thirty-eight thousand of them children. More than one hundred plant or animal species went extinct because of civilized humans.

All of this in one day.

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I don't think most people care, and I don't think most people will ever care. We can trot out whatever polls we want to try to prove most Americans actually do care about the Environment™, Justice™, Sustainability™—that they care about anything beyond being left alone to numb themselves with alcohol, cheap consumables, and television. We can cite (or make up) some poll saying that all other things being equal, 64 percent of Americans don't want penguins to be driven extinct (unless saving them will even slightly increase the price of gasoline); or we can cite (or make up) some other poll saying that 22 percent of American males would prefer to live on a habitable planet than to have sex with a supermodel (this number climbs to 45 percent if the men are not allowed to brag about it to their friends).<sup>322</sup> But the truth is that it's just not that important to most people—*it* in this case being the survival of tigers, salmon, traditional indigenous peoples, oceans, rivers, the earth; *it* also being justice, fairness, love, honesty, peace. If it were, "most people" would do something about it.

Sure, most people would rather that they themselves be treated with at least the pretense of justice, fairness, and so on, but so long as those in power aren't aiming their Peacekeepers™ at me, why should I care if brown people living on a sea of oil a half a world away get blown to bits? Likewise, so long as the price of my prescription anti-depressants stays reasonably low and the number of TV channels on my satellite dish stays high, why should I care that some stupid fish can't survive in a dammed river? It's survival of the fittest, damn it all, and I'm one of the fit, so I get to survive.

Another way to talk about people not caring what happens to the world is to talk about rape and child abuse. Most rapes are committed not by burly

strangers breaking into women's homes, nor by pasty-faced perverts lurking outside schools and in internet chat rooms, but instead by fathers, brothers, uncles, husbands, lovers, friends, counselors, pastors: those who purport to love the women (or men) they hurt. Similarly, most children are not abused by thugs who kidnap them and force them to act in porn films, but by their caretakers, those, once again, who purport to love them, who are supposed to help them learn how to be human beings. And of course these caretakers are taking care to teach these children how to be civilized human beings: teaching them that the physically powerful exploit and do violence against the less physically powerful; teaching them that exploiters routinely label themselves—and probably believe themselves—caretakers as they destroy those under their care; teaching them that under this awful system that's the *job* of caretakers; teaching them that life has no value (for of course we are all born with the knowledge that life has value, a knowledge that must be beaten, raped, and schooled out of us).

Those doing the raping, beating, schooling, are not only some group of strange "others": "trailer trash," "foreigners," "the poor." They include respected members of this society. Within this culture, they're normal people. Their behavior has been normalized.

If normal people within this culture are raping and beating even those they purport to love, what chance is there that they will not destroy the salmon, the forests, the oceans, the earth?



A few years ago I had an agent at a prestigious literary agency. The agency's address, if this gives an indication of how fancy schmancy the organization is, was One Madison Avenue (an entire floor, even!). I sent my agent the first seventy pages of the manuscript for *A Language Older Than Words*. She read them, then told me that if I cut the family stuff and the social criticism, she thought I'd have a book. She also told me that I was too angry. If I would only tone down the book and not frighten fence-sitters, she said, I'd have myself a bestseller.

I was shocked. I was of course familiar with the old artistic/literary line, "The devil comes promising a larger audience," but it never occurred to me I'd have the chance to sell out this early in my career.

I responded that there was an old blues DJ I liked to listen to who often said after spinning a song, "If you're not moving after that one, you're dead from the butt down." Well, I said, if you're not angry and frightened now, after everything this culture has done, you're dead from the heart out.



In retrospect, that might not have been the most relational thing I could have said.

We had this conversation the same day U.S.-backed troops massacred the MRTA members who had taken over the Japanese ambassador's house in Peru. I said to her, "If the MRTA members are going to give their lives, the least I can do is tell the truth. You're fired."

Her request—that I tone things down to not offend fence-sitters—is the non-battle-cry of cowards everywhere: Too scared even to say that they themselves are frightened, they resort to telling others—for their own good, of course—to tone down their words or actions so some mythical third party won't be affronted or frightened. *You must never blow up a dam*, they tell us, *or mainstream Americans will consider all environmentalists terrorists. You will actually hurt the cause of salmon.* Likewise, *You must never demand an end to old-growth logging (or even think about stopping industrial forestry), or you will alienate potential political allies.* And, *You must never speak out against capitalism (industrialism, utilitarianism, Christianity, science, civilization, and so on) or no one will take you seriously.*

It's not always cowards who say such lines. Sometimes it's people who for whatever reason fail to grasp the insatiability and utter implacability of the dominant culture's death urge. There were (and are) Indians—many of them—who pleaded with their relations to not upset the civilized: if only we all go along with this latest of the ever-shifting demands of the civilized, the logic went (and goes), we will finally be left somewhat alone on the remnants of our land. And there were Jews—many of them—who fell into the trap Nazis laid, baited with false hopes. If only we are reasonable, the logic once again goes, they, too, will be reasonable. If only we show ourselves to be good and worthy Germans—in some cases even good and worthy Nazis—the mass of good Germans will speak and act to protect us from harm.

What a load of horseshit.

It's easier to see this sad gullibility in retrospect than in the present, isn't it?

It always is.

I think it's just as much a mistake to count on help from the mass of good Americans as it was from the mass of good Germans. Some will certainly help, but I don't think there will ever be a mass awakening, where suddenly the majority, or even significant minority, of people do what is best for their landbase.

When I lived in Spokane, I had a friend with whom I would get together for dinner once a month or so. Sometimes we'd go to the symphony, sometimes to pick up trash by the side of a road. And we'd talk. Given what you know about me from my books you can probably guess that I often found myself itching to

talk about taking down civilization. That's not an itch I generally leave unscratched. But I was delicate, because nice as this person was, and as dedicated to cleaning up roadside trash, he was definitely what my former agent would have called a fence-sitter. When I'd get too explicit about the need to take down civilization he'd too-quickly make a joke, or get distracted, or suddenly remember something important he had to tell me on some other subject—any other subject—or he would get angry at me about something that didn't actually make him angry. So I learned to keep it light, to only hint, to make smaller and smaller talk while the world burned.

Fast-forward a decade to my last week before I left Spokane. He called me on the telephone. I could tell he was both excited and agitated.

He said, "I did it. I made the plunge."

"What did you do?" I thought maybe he was getting married, though so far as I knew he wasn't dating anyone.

He said, "I wrote a twenty dollar check to a local environmental organization."

I told him, sincerely, that I was happy for him.<sup>323</sup>

The seventeenth premise of this book—and this is sort of a combination of the second premise, that this culture will not undergo a voluntary transformation, and the tenth, that most members of this culture are insane—is that *it's a mistake (or more likely, denial) to base our decisions on whether our actions will or won't frighten fence-sitters or the mass of Americans.*

Sure, we can let the potential response of these people be one more piece of information that helps to influence our choices, but we must always remember that we are only responsible for our own actions. Just as we are not responsible for the choices—retributive or otherwise—made by those in power as putative response to any action we may take, so, too, we are not responsible for the response or non-response of the mass of Americans (or Czechs, Liberians, or Indonesians, for that matter).

Here's another way to put the seventeenth premise: The mass of civilized people will never be on our side.<sup>324</sup> I'm not saying by this that we should give up on educating or informing people (I am, after all, a writer: educating and informing is what I *do*). I'm saying, first, that we need to try to be aware of where our identification lies—with whom or what we identify—and we need to ask ourselves: If what the mass of Americans want is in opposition to what your own particular landbase needs, which do you choose to support? If it comes down to stark choices—which of course it already does—on which side will you take your stand (recognizing also that refusing to choose is just another way of choosing the default)?<sup>325</sup>

Second, I'm saying that we need to be aware that we have a finite amount of time each day and a finite amount of time in our lives, so if we actually hope to accomplish something tangible we need to choose wisely how we spend that time. Some people may feel it's the best use of their time to inch fence-sitters closer to falling to the side of the living, and by all means they should do that. I don't think most fence-sitters are effectively reachable, and so I do not write for them. I write for people who already know how horrible civilization is, and who want to do something about it. I want to encourage them to be more radical, more militant, just as others have encouraged me.

Further, we need to recognize that educating people will only go so far toward saving salmon, sturgeon, marlins, prairie dogs, forests, rivers, glaciers, oceans, skies, the planet. At some point we have to actually *do* something.

The problem is not and has never been that the mass of people do not have enough information, such that if we just present them with enough facts they will strive for justice, for sanity, for what is best for their landbase. Think again about rape. Rape is not caused by a lack of information. Similarly, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that dams kill salmon, or that deforestation kills creatures who live in forests. Would it have merely required information to get the whites who slaughtered Indians (or who took their land after the soldiers had done the slaughtering) to stand with these Indians against members of their own culture? Would it require that today, as traditional indigenous people continue to be put in reserves, concentration camps, prisons, and graves, and as their land continues to be stolen? When cancer kills those we love—our grandparents, brothers, sisters, children, friends, lovers—when chemicals cause little girls to develop breasts and pubic hair, when pesticides make children stupid and sickly, the problem is not education. The problem has never been education. To believe that it is, is to buy into yet one more lie that keeps us from acting to protect ourselves.

Or maybe it's not one more lie, but the same old lie, the same old faith-based excuse for inaction, except that this time instead of it being some mythical god or great mother who will save us if only we act in good enough faith—if only we are nice enough, kind enough, loving enough (using the culture's self-serving and toothless definition of love) to our exploiters—it is some just-as-mythical mass of Americans who will somehow save the day if only—if *only*—we are innocuous enough to not frighten them off (and not coincidentally, if only we do not upset those in power).

Even moreso than most people not being on our side, if we were to truly act in defense of our landbases, of our bodies, we would quickly find ourselves

hated by the exploiters (of course), the fence-sitters, mainstream Americans, mainstream liberal activists. (My goodness, if mainstream social justice activists assault people, hold them for cops to arrest, and chant complaints about having their demos ruined just because some people break a few windows, imagine what these same activists would do if people began to strike more than symbolic blows against this death culture?) We would find ourselves hated by everyone who identifies more closely with civilization than with their landbase.

In *The Culture of Make Believe* I was attempting among other things to understand the relationship between exploitation, contempt, a sense of entitlement, threats to that entitlement, and hatred. I had learned that after the American Civil War the number of lynchings in the American South increased by at least a couple orders of magnitude. I wanted to know why. My understanding came when I happened across a line by Nietzsche, "One does not hate when one can despise." I suddenly understood that perceived entitlement is key to nearly all atrocities, and that any threat to perceived entitlement will provoke hatred.

Here's what I wrote:

"Europeans felt that they were (and are) entitled to the land of North and South America. Slave owners clearly felt they were entitled to the labor (and the lives) of their slaves, not only in partial payment for protecting slaves from their own idleness, but also simply as a return on their capital investment. Owners of nonhuman capital today feel they, too, are entitled to the 'surplus return on labor,' as economists put it, as part of their reward for furnishing jobs, and to provide a return on *their* investment in capital. Rapists act on the belief that they are entitled to their victims' bodies. Americans act as though we are entitled to consume the majority of the world's resources, and to change the world's climate. All industrialized humans act like we're entitled to anything we want on this planet."<sup>326</sup>

I then wrote:

"From the perspective of those who are entitled, the problems begin when those they despise do not go along with—and have the power and wherewithal to not go along with—the perceived entitlement. That's where Nietzsche's statement comes in, and that's where hatred of the sort I'm trying to get at in this book becomes manifest. Several times in this book I have commented that hatred felt long and deeply enough no longer feels like hatred, but more like tradition, economics, religion, what have you. It is when those traditions are challenged, when the entitlement is threatened, when the masks of religion, economics, and so on are pulled away that hate transforms from its more seemingly sophisticated, 'normal,' chronic state—where those exploited are looked down upon, or

despised—to a more acute and obvious manifestation. Hate becomes more perceptible when it is no longer normalized. Another way to say all of this is that if the rhetoric of superiority works to maintain the entitlement, hatred and direct physical force remain underground. But when that rhetoric begins to fail, force—and hatred—waits in the wings, ready to explode.”<sup>327</sup>

The point as it relates to the current book is that if you think the exploiters responded with fury and great violence when capitalists were merely disallowed from owning human beings<sup>328</sup>—when that particular perceived entitlement was thwarted—just imagine the backlash when civilized humans are stopped from perpetrating the routine exploitation that characterizes, makes possible, forms the basis of, and is the essence of their way of life.

The next few pages of *The Culture of Make Believe* continue to elaborate on this idea and I’d like to quote them now at length:

“Pretend that you were raised to believe that blacks—niggers would be more precise in this formulation—really are like children, but strong. And pretend that niggers working for whites is simply part of the day-to-day experience of living. You do not question it any more than you question breathing, eating, or sleeping. It is simply a fact of life: whites own niggers, niggers work for whites.

“Now pretend that someone from the outside begins to tell you that what you are doing is wrong. This outsider knows nothing of the life you live and that your father and his father lived. To your knowledge this outsider has never walked the fields and actually watched the slaves work, has never gone over the figures to see that your farm wouldn’t be viable without these slaves, and doesn’t know the slaves well enough to know that they, too, could not survive without the things you provide for them. Pretend that your slaves listen to this outsider, and because of this, your relationship with them begins to deteriorate, even to the point that you begin to lose money.

“If it were me—had I been raised under these circumstances and with those beliefs—I think it possible that once I got over my initial shock at the temerity of this outsider meddling in something that is none of his or her business, I would have become angry, and perhaps felt eventually outrage towards this interloper who was threatening to ruin my way of life. Raised in those circumstances, it would have taken more courage than most of us have, I think, to admit that one’s way of life is based on exploitation, and to gracefully begin to live a different way.

“It’s easy enough at this remove to simply say that slaveholders were immoral, and that members of the KKK and other hate groups were a bunch of stupid bigots with whom we have nothing in common.

“But are you sure?”

“Try this. What if instead of owning people, we’re talking about owning land. Someone tells you that no matter how much you paid to purchase title to some piece of land, the land itself does not belong to you. No longer may you do whatever you wish with it. You may not cut the trees on it. You may not build on it. You may not run a bulldozer over it to put in a driveway. All of those activities are immoral, because they’re based on your exploitation of a living thing: in this case the land. Did you ask the land if it wants you to build on it? Do you care what the land thinks? But the land can’t think, you say. Ah, but that’s just what you think. It is how you were taught to think. Let’s say further that your livelihood and your way of life are based on working this land—the outsiders call it exploiting—and that if the outsiders have their way you’ll be out of business. Again and again they tell you that you are a bad person, a stupid bigot, because you refuse to see that your way of life is based on the exploitation of something you don’t perceive as having any rights—or sentience—to begin with.

“Angry yet?”

“Then how about this? Outsiders take away your computer because the process of manufacturing the hard drive killed women in Thailand. They take your clothes because they were made in sweatshops, your meat because it was factory farmed, your cheap vegetables because the agricorporations that provided them drove family farmers out of business (or maybe because lettuce doesn’t like to be factory farmed: ‘lettuce prefers diversity,’ say the outsiders), and your coffee because its production destroys rainforests, decimates migratory songbird populations, and drives African, Asian, and South and Central American subsistence farmers off their land. They take your car because of global warming, and your wedding ring because mining exploits workers and destroys landscapes and communities. They take your TV, microwave, and refrigerator because, hell, they take the whole damn electrical grid because the generation of electricity is, they say, so environmentally expensive (dams kill salmon, coal plants strip the tops off mountains and generate acid rain, wind generators kill birds, and let’s not even talk about nukes). Imagine if outsiders wanted to take away all these things—without your consent—because they had determined, without your input, that all of these things are exploitative and immoral. Imagine that these outsiders actually began to succeed in taking away these parts of your life you see as so fundamental. I’d imagine you’d be pretty pissed. Maybe you’d start to hate the assholes doing this to you, and maybe if enough other people who were pissed off had already formed an organization to fight back against these people who were trying to destroy your life—I could easily see you asking, ‘What

do these people have against me anyway?’—maybe you’d even put on white robes and funny hats, and maybe you’d even get a little rough with a few of them, if that was what it took to stop them from destroying your way of life.”<sup>329</sup>

This is the typical response of the civilized to any threat to their perceived right to exploit. Recall once again Thomas Jefferson’s explanation of what would happen to those Indians who fought back: “In war, they will kill some of us; we shall destroy all of them.”<sup>330</sup> Unfortunately, Indians and their allies have not yet been able to stop the grinding of this machine-culture. Yet they have still received that fury for even trying, and often for merely existing and showing to their exploiters that other ways of being are possible (and desirable).

You really wanna see some hatred? You wanna see some violence? Thwart the civilized. Shut them down. Stop them from destroying the planet.

The civilized will smile as they tear you limb from limb.

ANOTHER PROBLEM I HAVE WITH BUDDHISM IS THAT BUDDHISM, like other “great” religions of civilization (including science, and including capitalism), isn’t land-based. It’s been transposed over space, which means by definition it is disconnected from the land, and also means it values, by definition, abstraction over the particularity of place. A religion is, I think, supposed to teach us how to live (which, if we’re to live sustainably, must also mean that it teaches us how to live in a certain place). Also a religion is supposed to teach us how to connect to the divine. But people will live differently in different places, which means religions must be different in different places, and must emerge from specific places themselves, and not be abstracted from these places. Thus a religion that emerged from the Near East a couple thousand years ago may or may not have been helpful then and there, but quite probably will not apply so well to where I live right now. It is insane—literally, in terms of being disconnected from physical reality—to believe that a religion that tells someone how to live in, say, the desert of the American Southwest would be applicable (or even particularly helpful) to someone living in the redwood rainforests of the homeland of the Tolowa. It is similarly insane—and disrespectful of the divinity inherent in any particular place—to believe that a religion that helps experience the divine in the desert will particularly help me experience the divine at the ocean’s edge. The places are different. So will be the experience of the divine.

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Even as I was writing the previous ten or so pages, I could hear in my mind the howl of outraged Buddhist pacifists (mainly white Buddhist pacifists: my Asian Buddhist friends aren’t nearly so defensive about Buddhism as are many of the American Buddhists I’ve encountered, and in fact they often share the same criticisms, both of Buddhism and of American Buddhists). It’s all very strange and interesting. I’ve found that there are many things I can bash with no one raising even an eyebrow, much less a fist. I can bash the unholy trinity of capitalism, Christianity, and corporations. I can bash schooling, wage jobs, civilization. I can bash environmentalists. I can even bash writers who bash civilization. Few seem to mind. But at the slightest hint of criticizing Buddhism (or science,



which is another unholy cow that evokes the same response as Buddhism, as does, at least occasionally, pornography) I can see many of the faces in the audience harden and can feel their guts churn, their sphincters start to quiver.

« « «

During a talk a couple of days ago, I amplified my analysis of Buddhism. I was surprised and pleased that the audience interrupted me with applause when I discussed the possibility that equanimity in the face of the culture's destructiveness can mask "cowardice, stupidity, and an appalling lack of creativity," and can be an avoidance of responsibility for acting to halt the atrocities. But I received an email the next morning that typifies the magical thinking of so many pacifists. The letter read in part: "While I would agree with every word you spoke about our civilization, I wouldn't agree that morality is always situational—there are certain acts that are soul-destroying, and advocating violence is one of them. Little word-games about Buddhist monks or innocent children being harmed are just cheap. I too used to hold the nine-inch nails philosophy—that was before I lived 50 years and had three children,<sup>290</sup> and love. The destruction trope is just another example of our society's harmful philosophy coming in by the back door. You're being co-opted by the need to control things. I hate to see your soul co-opted by the forces of destruction.

"The Great Mother will heal Her body, if she has to do it with cockroaches and finches (look at Galapagos). It is only human survival we are talking about here. We are doomed if we don't change, yes, but the earth will surely endure. So we must first put this argument in the proper Selfish context—i.e., saving our own asses. It is presumptuous and sacrilegious [*sic*] to speak of saving the earth.

"You must not suggest to these damaged and wounded humans, searching so desperately for meaning and peace, that they start breaking things. The ones that [*sic*] come to your talks are harmed and frightened. You have some power—there is a dark side and a light side—we all know this in our hearts. Please stay on the side of the light."

I'm sure by now you can parse out the unfounded and unstated premises in this note. The first premise is that morality is abstracted from circumstance, meaning in this case that (direct) violence is always—*under each and every circumstance*—wrong, even when it might be necessary to stop even more violence, implying as well that one has no moral responsibility to halt monstrous acts that happen even on one's own doorstep if stopping those acts would require muddying one's spiritual hands. This is the way of the Good German.

It is the way of the Good American. It's certainly the way of the good dogmatic pacifist.

Next, any attempts to even discuss these possibilities must be dismissed as "word games," "cheap," an example of the culture's "harmful philosophy coming in by the back door," and a need to control. This is all exactly what I meant early on in this book by the "Gandhi shield" pacifists often use to not only keep evil thoughts at bay but to make sure no one else thinks them either.

I don't want to go to the same well too many times, but a discussion by R. D. Laing applies. He wrote: "If Jack succeeds in forgetting something [such as the fact that we have the responsibility—the *obligation*—to stop the horrors of civilization, and the ability to do so, *if we choose to*], this is of little use if Jill continues to remind him of it. He must induce her not to do so. The safest way would be not just to make her keep quiet about it, but to induce her to forget it also.

"Jack may act upon Jill in many ways. He may make her feel guilty for keeping on 'bringing it up.' He may invalidate her experience. This can be done more or less radically. He can indicate merely that it is unimportant or trivial, whereas it is important and significant to her. Going further, he can shift the modality of her experience from memory to imagination: 'It's all in your imagination.' Further still, he can invalidate the content: 'It never happened that way.' Finally, he can invalidate not only the significance, modality, and content, but her very capacity to remember at all, and make her feel guilty for doing so in the bargain."<sup>291</sup>

"This is not unusual. People are doing such things to each other all the time. In order for such transpersonal invalidation to work, however, it is advisable to overlay it with a thick patina of mystification. For instance, by denying that this is what one is doing, and further invalidating any perception that it is being done by ascriptions of 'How can you think such a thing?' 'You must be paranoid.' And so on."<sup>292</sup>

The next unstated premise—and I'm going into such great detail because this woman's letter and the perspective it represents is not unusual, but instead is insanely common—is that a desire to stop atrocities such as the extirpation of species is a manifestation of a "need to control."

I used to have this fear, too, that to affect another's behavior—even when that other is hurting me directly—is to be "controlling." But to believe this is to internalize the rhetoric and worldview of the abuser.

Years ago, if you recall, I was in a couple of emotionally abusive relationships, where the women would call me names, harangue me for days, and so on. When I'd ask them to stop they'd say I was trying to censor or control them.

Finally, a friend asked me, "What will it take for you to say 'Fuck you' to this woman and walk away?"

"I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"That would be rude."

"She's not being rude to you?"

"I don't want to put myself on the same level. I don't want to cross some sort of middle line between us. I can talk about things on my half . . ."

"Ah, you've been to counseling! You can say, 'When you call me names, it makes me feel bad,' but you can't say, 'Cut this shit out!' then hang up the phone . . ."

"Hanging up on someone is unacceptable."

"So it's okay for her to perpetrate unacceptable behavior on you, but you aren't allowed to call her on it, nor even to absent yourself? That's crazy."

I opened my mouth to say something, then shut it, then opened it again, then clamped it shut.

That very night the woman called and began haranguing me. I said "Fuck you!" and hung up the phone. (Unfortunately, and this reveals how stupid denial makes us, it took me quite a while longer to figure out that after hanging up on her I didn't have to answer when she called back! It didn't take much longer than that, though, for me to realize that not only did I not need to answer the phone, I could simply not allow *anyone* to harangue me. If they do, I kick them out of my life. What a concept!)

There is an idea, no, a wish cherished by many, that love implies pacifism. If we love we cannot ever consider violence, even to protect those we love. I'm not sure that mother grizzly bears would agree, nor mother moose (I've heard it said that the most dangerous creature in the forest, apart, of course, from civilized humans, is a moose when you're between her and her child), nor many other mothers I've known. I've been attacked by mother horses, cows, mice, chickens, geese, eagles, hawks, and hummingbirds who thought I was threatening their children. I have known many human mothers who would kill anyone who was going to harm their little ones. If a mother mouse is willing to put her life on the line by attacking someone eight thousand times her size, how pathetic it is that we construct religious and spiritual philosophies that tell us that to attack even those who are killing those we most dearly love—or those we pretend we love—is to not love at all. That leads to the fifteenth premise of this book: *Love does not imply pacifism.*

I have a friend, a former prisoner, who is very smart, and who says that

dogmatic pacifists are the most selfish people he knows, because they place their moral purity—or to be more precise, their self-conception of moral purity—above stopping injustice.

Years ago I spoke with the wonderful philosopher and writer Kathleen Dean Moore about why calling the earth our mother is not always helpful. I first asked her what were some of the lies we tell ourselves about our relationship to the land.

She responded, “In order of outrageousness: That human beings are separate from—and superior to—the rest of natural creation. That Earth and all its creatures were created to serve human ends. That an act is right if it creates the greatest wealth for the greatest number of people. That a corporation’s highest responsibility is to its stockholders. That we can have it all—endlessly mining the land and the sea—and never pay a price. That technology will provide a way to solve every problem, even those created by technology. That it makes sense to barge salmon smolts past dams to the sea, so that grain can move down-river in barges. That a pine plantation is the same as a forest. That you can poison a river without poisoning your children. And the biggest and most dangerous lie of all: That the Earth is endlessly and infinitely resilient.”

I asked why that is so dangerous.

She said: “We are doing damage now—to the atmosphere, to the seas, to the climate—that may be beyond the power of healing. When the Earth is whole, it is resilient. But once it is damaged, the power of the Earth to heal itself seeps away. In a weakened world, if we turn against the land, pour chemical fertilizers onto worn-out fields, sanitize wastewater with poisons, dam more rivers, burn more oil, bear more children, and never acknowledge that there may be no chance of healing, never admit what we have done and what we have failed to do—then, who can forgive us?”

I asked, “Why is this so hard for us to understand? We see evidence all around us.”

Her answer: “Long-standing ways of thinking, even the way we talk, reinforce the fiction. Think of the metaphor of the Earth as a mother, and the slogan, ‘Love your mother.’ What does this mean? It might simply acknowledge that humans are created from matter that comes from the Earth. But so are Oldsmobiles, and that doesn’t make the Earth the mother of Oldsmobiles.

“I think the whole ‘love your mother’ metaphor is just wishful thinking. Mothers can usually be counted on to clean up after their children. They are warm-hearted and forgiving: mothers will follow crying children to their rooms and stroke their hair, even if the child’s sorrow is shame at his treatment of his mother. It’s nice to think the Earth is a mother who will come after us and clean

up the mess and protect us from our mistakes, and then forgive us the monstrous betrayal. But even mothers can be worn out and used up. And then what happens to her children?

“There’s an ad from an oil company that shows the image of the Earth along with the caption, ‘Mother Earth is a tough old gal.’”

I said, “The implication being that the Earth is invulnerable.”

She responded, “A dangerous implication. I wrote a letter to the company saying, ‘If the Earth really were your mother, she would grab you with one rocky hand and hold you under water until you no longer bubbled.’ Cosmic justice.”

It should come as no surprise that the great traditions of pacifism emerge from great religions of civilization: Christian, Buddhist, Hindu.

I recently saw an interview with longtime pacifist activist Philip Berrigan—one of the last before he died—in which he stated more or less proudly that spiritual-based pacifism is not meant to change things in the physical world, but relies on a Christian God to fix things. The interviewer had asked, “What do you say to critics of the Plowshares movement who claim that your actions have not produced tangible results?”

Berrigan answered, and especially note his second and third sentences: “Americans want to see results because we’re pragmatists. God doesn’t require results. God requires *faithfulness*. You try to do an act of social justice, and do it lovingly. You don’t threaten anybody or hurt any military personnel during these actions. And you take the heat. You stand by and wait for the arrest.”<sup>293</sup>

I can’t speak for Berrigan, but I want to see results because the planet is being killed.

In any case, I think Berrigan is wrong. If there is a Christian God, and if several thousand years of history is any indication, He is not, to use the woman’s term, on the side of the light. Given all evidence, I’m not sure I want to count on a Christian God to halt environmental destruction.

The Dalai Lama takes a more rounded, intelligent, and useful view on violence. He is, in addition, very aware of his premises, and tries to state them when he can. He has said, “Violence is like a very strong pill. For a certain illness, it may be very useful, but the side effects are enormous. On a practical level it’s very complicated, so it’s much safer to avoid acts of violence.” He then continued, “There is a pertinent point in the Vinaya literature, which explains the disciplinary codes that monks and nuns must observe to retain the purity of their vows. Take the example of a monk or a nun confronting a situation where there are only two alternatives: either to take the life of another person, or to take one’s own life. Under such circumstances, taking one’s life is justified to avoid taking

the life of another human being, which would entail transgressing one of the four cardinal vows.” His next sentence reveals the whole point, and brings this discussion home: “Of course, this assumes one accepts the theory of rebirth; otherwise this is very silly.”<sup>294</sup>

All of which leads to the sixteenth premise of the book: *The material world is primary. This does not mean that the spirit does not exist, nor that the material world is all there is. It means that spirit mixes with flesh. It means also that real world actions have real world consequences. It means we cannot rely on Jesus, Santa Claus, the Great Mother, or even the Easter Bunny to get us out of this mess. It means this mess really is a mess, and not just the movement of God’s eyebrows. It means we have to face this mess ourselves (even if we do get some help from the Easter Bunny and others). It means that for the time we are here on Earth—whether or not we end up somewhere else after we die, and whether we are condemned or privileged to live here—the Earth is the point. It is primary. It is our home. It is everything. It is “very silly” to think or act or be as though this world is not real and primary. It is very silly and pathetic to not live our lives as though our lives are real.*

DURING THE CONVERSATION IN WHICH MY FORMER AGENT TOLD ME that if I ever wanted to reach an audience, I'd have to tone down my work, she also told me that I was a nihilist.

I felt vaguely insulted. I didn't know what a nihilist was, but I knew from her tone that it must be a bad thing. I pictured an angry teenager leaning against a building, wearing black slacks, turtleneck, and beret, scowling and chain-smoking.

But that's not me, so I looked up *nihilist* in the dictionary.

The first definition—that life is meaningless and that there are no grounds for any moral truths—clearly doesn't fit me. Nor is it true that I do not believe in truth, beauty, or love.<sup>342</sup> The second definition—that the current social order is so destructive and irredeemable that it needs to be taken down to its core, and to have its core removed—fits me like a glove, I suppose the kind you'd put on to not leave fingerprints.

I've had a lot of conversations with Casey about nihilism, and about how the whole black turtleneck thing really doesn't work for me. And how I rarely scowl. Emma Goldman is famously (and incorrectly) quoted as saying, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."<sup>343</sup> Well, I don't like to dance, but if I can't laugh, then you can start the revolution without me.

One day Casey said, "I've got you figured out."

I raised my eyebrows.

"You," he said, "are a romantic nihilist." And then he laughed.

So did I. I laughed and laughed. Yes, I thought, a revolution of romantic nihilists. I would be down for that. Count me in.

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I did a talk in Portland the other day. I heard that afterwards something of a firestorm erupted on a local discussion website, as some pacifists attacked me for not adhering to the One True Way of Social Change™, and then non-pacifists responded, pacifists re-responded, and so on. A friend told me not to bother going to read the whole thing ("There's nothing useful. Lots of heads in the sand.") but did send me one post that seems to me to capture the essence of

what I'm trying to get at (in four short paragraphs instead of hundreds of pages). Here it is:

"Himalayan blackberries are not native to Oregon. Their hideous thorny brambles have taken over huge tracts of land here. They kill native species. They hurt like hell when you step on one or fall into a clump of them. If you try to hack them down they'll grow back (they are tough suckers). If you try to pull them out by the roots their thorns bury themselves in your thumb and fester. The best thing to do for a big field full of blackberries would be to burn it, then bulldoze the hell out of it. Get them out of there down to every last root.

"The social, political and psychological state that we find ourselves in is the cultural equivalent of blackberries. Our culture is invasive, destructive, painful, and should never have been planted in the first place. We are a part of it (whether we want to be or not).

"Derrick Jensen wants to burn it all down.

"I want to drive the bulldozer."

« « «

A few months ago the editors of *The Ecologist* started a new feature in their magazine: Each issue they ask an environmentalist or writer a series of questions about the books that have most deeply influenced them, and what books they would like to recommend to others. Many of the books are those we might expect, *Small is Beautiful*, *When Corporations Rule the World*, *The Lorax*. One writer evidently decided to forego modesty, and recommended his own books.

They asked me. I guess I must have been in a black turtleneck mood, because I let fly with a response that could charitably be described as scowling, if such is possible in writing.

Question one: Which book first made you realise that something was wrong (with the planet/political system/economic system, etc)?

My answer: It wasn't a book. It was the destruction of place after place that I loved. And it was the complete insanity of a culture where so many people work at jobs they hate: What does it mean when the vast majority of people spend the vast majority of their waking hours doing things they'd rather not do? The culture itself convinced me something was wrong, by being so extraordinarily destructive of human happiness and, far more importantly, the world itself.

That said, Neil Evernden's *The Natural Alien* was the first book I read that let me know I was not insane: that the culture is insane. It was the first book I read that did not take the dominant culture's utilitarian worldview as a given.



Question two: Which one book would you give to every politician?

Answer: One that explodes.

Before you freak out, let's change the question and see what you think: Which one book would you give to Hitler, Goering, Himmler, and Goebbels?

Let's ask this another way: Would a book have changed Hitler? I don't think so. Unless it exploded.

And before you freak out at the comparison of modern politicians to Hitler and his gang, try to look at it from the perspective of wild salmon, grizzly bears, bluefin tuna, or any of the (fiscally) poor or indigenous human beings. Those in power now are more destructive than anyone has ever been. And they are for the most part psychologically unreachable. And if someone does reach some politician, that politician will no longer be in power.

I recently shared a stage with Ward Churchill. He said the primary difference between the U.S. and the Nazis is that the U.S. didn't lose.

I responded with one word: "Yet."

Question three: What book would you give to every CEO?

Answer: See above.

Question four: What book would you give to every child?

Answer: I wouldn't give them a book. Books are part of the problem: this strange belief that a tree has nothing to say until it is murdered, its flesh pulped, and then (human) people stain this flesh with words. I would take children outside and put them face to face with chipmunks, dragonflies, tadpoles, hummingbirds, stones, rivers, trees, crawdads.

That said, if you're going to force me to give them a book, it would be *The Wind in the Willows*, which I hope would remind them to go outside.

Question five: It's 2050. The ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising. You're only allowed one book on the Ark. What is it?

Answer: I wouldn't take a book, and I wouldn't get on the ark. I would kill myself (and take a dam out with me). I do not want to live without a living landbase. Without a living landbase I would already be dead. No book would even remotely compensate. Not a million books. Not a million computers. Not a million people would compensate.