Why the Center Can't Hold: A Diagnosis of Puritanized America

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Well, good for you!

But one shouldn’t respond too sarcastically. There are only so many moves on the board.

We’ve seen that a fundamentalist insistence on one’s particular choice of religion as “the last word” is not likely to solve the problems of America or the world. Along similar lines, we’ve seen the hope God will save us in spite of ourselves has no foundation either in experience or thoughtful theology. But then when we turn to the political process as a place where we can take up our duties as adults and we discover the process itself seems irremediably broken, for some there seems only one option left. It’s the option to give up on society and live for oneself, or for oneself and a few others. It expresses itself sometimes in the declaration: “I’ve decided to be a survivor!”

If one is going to critique this, it’s good to proceed discreetly. For starters, there’s a significant difference between “retreat” and “radical separation.” It may be “retreat” that is really the goal of the speaker. As one who’s taught night classes, I’ve encountered more than once a woman who broke off her formal education to take up a life as wife and mother, and who — once her children were past their teens — had returned to school. I’ve heard this woman rhapsodize about those rare days when, somehow, everyone was going to be out of the house for a full twenty-four hours or so, leaving her on her own. This was not some woman engaged in an extramarital affair, nor one who wanted a divorce or who hated her children. But the joy — the sheer unspeakable relief — of having a whole twenty-four hours in which no one would call out to her “Mom!” or “Honey!” was bliss. She just
wanted to reconnect with herself, wanted gently to think her own thoughts and live for a few hours in her own rhythm. The bliss of it all!

Such a woman knew the value of making a “retreat.” (Typically, she was a wonderful student.)

In the East, the tradition of the Holy Man has a long history. While most Asians are not official Holy Men, even today it would be impossible in many parts of Asia to grow up without having a passing acquaintance with the phenomenon. These Holy Men are people disconnected somehow from the day-to-day affairs of society.

The “disconnection” can have very different textures. In the Asian traditions I value most, emphasis is placed on a social orientation for the disconnection itself. One leaves society, but does so for the sake of society. It’s true that Siddhartha fled from wife and child, but he fled toward Buddha-hood. As the Buddha, he founded monasteries for monks and nuns and lived forty years in the service of all who came to him for guidance.

In the branch of Buddhism called Zen, much effort is expended by the novice in achieving “satori.” The koans (sound of one hand clapping, etc.) and the rock gardens play a part in this. The Zen-master is emphatic however in insisting the blissful awakening—the breakthrough to bliss called “satori”—is no end in itself. Its value is as a threshold to a life of example and service to others.

So “retreats” can be of great utility—for the housewife; for Gandhi; for Buddhists; for any one of us.

I’d hazard one of the most consequential retreats in American history was that of Thoreau to Walden Pond—for about two years and two months. The withdrawal was by no means complete; he wasn’t walled off from the rest of society. To some perhaps his solitude may have seemed a stunt or an episode of self-indulgence. His purpose was to figure out what really mattered. A good pragmatic American can ask: “What could be more conceited and self-centered than such a project?”

Yet to take the measure of its aftermath would be difficult. The essay we call “On Civil Disobedience” no doubt draws much of its vitality from those near eight hundred days in which he was mostly his own companion. What his essay has done in India and America and elsewhere to inspire humane non-violent struggles for freedom during the century and a half since it was published
is startling. It could be a much better guide to the human future than Admiral Mahan’s *Influence of Sea Power*. That it may yet help head off what some thoughtful people regard a destined nuclear rendezvous with armageddon remains, I think, a hope worth sharing.

Thoreau has fans in many places. Some find in his observation of nature the beginnings of American environmentalism. Some are impressed by his care for words and the construction of sentences. He was searching for a rhetoric that lets things speak for themselves—with minimal imposition from the writer’s ideology and assumptions. Like the English Romantic poets and the French Impressionist painters, he wanted to be an open-minded listener and watcher for what nature was presenting. Having listened and seen, he struggled for the most down-to-earth speech he could muster to express what he’d discovered. While a search for this kind of innocence was a very American thing, it belonged to a countercurrent of American culture—for it owed nothing to Puritan distrust of the natural world. The effect of Thoreau’s effort on later American diction is hard to gauge. My hunch is that it’s been considerable, and that Whitman, Mark Twain, and Hemingway are among those in his debt.

One praises Thoreau in the awareness he’s often been dismissed as quaint by fellow Americans, both in his lifetime and up to the present day. (So help me, there are presently intellectuals in our institutions of higher learning who will tell us “Thoreau is passé.” What they seem to overlook is that the environment about which he wrote with such care is also on the verge of becoming passé.) For some of us, this only adds to his distinction. He attempted to share with us his savvy anticipations of the harm rampant consumerism could do to us. Long before most of us realized we were enthralled, he expressed misgivings about the way we were identifying the industrial revolution with moral progress. He had reservations too about the way we were identifying a budding American nationalism with moral progress. He took the heretical position one need not be a soldier to be a patriot. You could love America even without going out and killing an Indian, or Mexican, or black person to prove it.

My point in discussing him is that Thoreau’s retreat was one with instructive consequences for society. It should keep us from simply condemning all retreats as anti-social.
On the other hand, there are the likes of Ted Kaczynski and Jim Jones, where one has to feel things could not have gone more wrong. Kaczynski’s withdrawal seems to have been rooted not only in criticism and near-despair, but to have been corroded by misanthropy. His published manifesto is not lacking in logic and sensibility (some of it echoing Thoreau; some of it anticipating pages in this book), but it’s a logic and sensibility insufficiently tethered by humane feeling—not too distant from the mindset of professional advisors to our executive branch who defend torture and death by drone as our path to national security.

The case of charismatic leaders like Jones, who persuade whole groups to withdraw into cadres of “survivors,” is more difficult to assess and judge. In Jones we sense something of the fundamentalism criticized in earlier chapters of this book. He and his disciples claimed to possess a wisdom that was unassailable. The claim was attended by a tendency to reject everyone not a member of the group. Still, it would be a mistake to meet this rejection with an equally blanket rejection of Jones and company. I would be very distressed if a child or friend of mine were involved with him; but we won’t understand this form of withdrawal unless we factor in its intent that at least something will be rescued from the current dismal scene—a biblical remnant, an undestroyed sample of humanity from which to start afresh.

In fact, here too, lest we slip into an easy demonization of programs such as Jones’ program, let us note that, even when they lapse over into killing outsiders, they’re not as strange to us as we might pretend. When we undertake adventures in other countries that entail thousands of civilian deaths (our invasion of Iraq for instance) and when we write off these deaths (along with predictable deaths of many of our own soldiers) as collateral damage, our pursuit of national security seems to have landed us in a mindset that rivals the anti-social behavior of survivalists like Jones. That we shield our acts with the umbrella phrase “acts of state” and as requisite for national security, shouldn’t blind us to their deep affinities with bizarre behavior and the mental aberrations that separation from the larger community of humankind can give scope to.

In the space between retreats that have positive social consequences on the one hand, and radical separations from society that are misanthropically tainted on the other, there’s a vast grey
area. Sulks (refusals to resolve grievances) figure into this area as do some forms of despairing altogether non-violent personal optings out. Regarding the latter, I had a brilliant student, an expert at writing scientific reports who worked at one of our national nuclear labs, who—so far as I could tell—eventually came to regard the human future as so daunting that he turned from the contemporary scene to immerse himself in study of his family tree and in pursuit of an understanding of Celtic poetry. I understood him quite well. Another student, whom I regard as the most gifted I’ve encountered, has frequently threatened to forsake all attention to current affairs and go live at peace with his soul in Amsterdam. (I tell him it won’t work; but the impulse to try is understandable.)

Various programs of survivor-hood present themselves for attention. One hears of people who are busily collecting canned goods and bottled beverages. Among them some also are stocking firearms. Others, like the student of Celtic poetry, are burying themselves in hobbies that shelter consciousness from the undeniable manner in which, in Chesterton’s phrase, “the sky grows darker yet and the sea rises higher.” Some, as noted earlier, seek refuge in drugs and alcohol. Some retreat to gated communities, seeking at least a delaying action there from the encroaching ugliness, unpredictability, and danger of the contemporary world. Others place their hope in financial advisors, and hope the right stock portfolio will enable them to weather whatever storms may come.

These people surely should not be despised. Darwin has taught us that the survival instinct is evolution’s great spring.

The dividing line I’d say for judging these tactics for survival is whether they function within the context of a social strategy or are taken up in rejection of such. It may seem a truism to say that if it’s the latter—a radical rejection of social context—they won’t do much for society. The point we ought not to overlook is that neither will they do much for the survivalist.

Once in an informal seminar (there was neither tuition paid nor attendance kept) I listened as the delightful literary critic and social anthropologist René Girard posed a riddle. He asked us: “What books would you read were you truly stranded alone on a desert island with no expectation of escape?” People around the table made various proposals. Eventually Girard called a halt:
“You’re all wrong. You wouldn’t read any books at all—for reading’s a function of our sociality; once there’s no longer a prospect for social interaction, reading stops.” Girard, with Gallic exuberance and a smile, was playing with us, and I can’t say how sincerely he was invested in his answer; but he was making a point.

The world of “meaningfulness” begins to collapse when there’s no sociality. This is why “I’ve decided to be a survivor!”—if it’s intended as a get-out-of-society-free card—fails even before it can get started. There are, of course, subsidiary arguments too. If human folly incinerates the globe, a mere decision to survive is not going to prove efficacious. Likewise, if global warming undoes the food chain, that may be inconvenient even for those living alone on mountain tops. Epidemics could also prove a problem. And any project of emigration to another planet—something I hear my more technologically inclined friends take seriously—would seem problematic too if there’s no coherently functioning society here from which to launch. But these are subsidiary considerations. The trump card to most of this thinking is where Girard played it. Our world is pretty much held together by our human relationships. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world at the cost of these relationships to others? He loses in fact the only world he cares to inhabit.

Assigning to a special parenthesis the case of the Buddha, there’s a sadly common case: the young father who, wishing to survive, runs in panic from the family he has started. In his middle years, he may return, hoping to reclaim what he abandoned. Typically, the opportunity isn’t there. It’s not even from lack of forgiveness. People have simply moved on. In those fortunate cases where he does reintegrate, he still can’t recover what he lost. One must allow for special cases, but typically, the man he once was, and the man he might have become, is not what has survived.