

When a culture is dying, it's pocked with noble deracinates (who signally embody the virtues of its mind and have lost its heart), who may well be harbingers of the succeeding culture, a majestic vanguard. But when a culture is on the verge of rebirth, these same folk are a rearguard, sociologically sad howsoever personally vigorous and happy. Perhaps depending partly on what I've most recently eaten, I think our culture in case #1 or case #2: nobody can know....This thinksheet is an open letter addressed to M.W. (an actual person, a Cape Codder), in response to his CCT 9Dec84 essay "Just send me a sign." I hope to know him as a person: I know him well as a type, the type the Religious Right rails against as "secular humanist." (And is the Religious Right vanguard or rearguard? Nobody knows. And how much enduring religious content is there is today's Muslim jihad against the West? That's right: nobody knows--except virtually all who make a living on journalism: they must "know," for the same reason pollsters must "know" who's going to get elected.)

Dear M \_\_\_\_\_ W \_\_\_\_\_,

Your "Just send me a sign" prayer need wait no longer: this letter is the answer, the sign you've been waiting for. (Please modify your first impression of this statement by taking seriously the above paragraph. But if you still think I think I have a revelation from God for you, you are still right.)

I know you're a "deracinate" and judge (from this and your other essays) that you're "noble" (as defined in this thinksheet's first paragraph). The noun refers to an objective fact: you are "uprooted" (Lat., "de-rac.") from the heart of our culture, yours and mine (as I exhibit, from your essay, below); the adjective refers to a subjective fact: I judge the essential qualities of your mind to be admirable and your ethical responsiveness to be essential (and increasingly appearing to be so) to truly human life on this suffering and shrinking planet. (Possible qualification on your nobility: Your "send me a sign" may be cynical: you may "know" there's Nobody to send a sign. You sound agnostic, but you may be an atheist wolf in an agnostic sheep's clothing.)

As this is an open letter, let me quote you at length sufficient for my public to feel your message, the sign(al) you're sending: "Look, if there's Something Going On, I want to know about it. I want a sign. I want an unequivocal message from on high saying yes, there are things beyond your earthly experience....I'm convinced that nothing can happen outside the laws of nature. There's got to be a physical, scientific reason for everything that happens. If there weren't, we'd have chaos; there'd be no solid anchorage anywhere. The one thing we can count on is the dependability of nature's laws. They can't have exceptions....God doesn't step in and suspend the rules once in a while just to keep us impressed. ...Only a mean little god would play such tricks on us....I've not only had no messages from beyond, my spiritual telephone hasn't even wrung. I've had no visions, no unexplainable experiences, no nudges from the other world....With me, everything has been... explainable...except for my unbelievable good fortune....I'm even beginning to wonder if my good fortune is in itself a message. If it is, what is it saying? Be grateful? I am, but to whom? Mine has been a sort of unfocused gratitude. My treasures are real enough but I can't find the address of the sender....Or is the message telling me to go and give all I have to the poor? Whoa! I'm only human....If something IS going on out there, then send me a real message. I'm too dumb for subtleties....Send the message in English. Then I'll believe it. Then maybe I'll transform myself and repent of my evil ways."

OVER

Now, in case you'd like to respond by number, my notes are numbered:

1. Exactly  $\frac{1}{2}$  century ago I was president of a science club and a convinced Technocrat. I think you're old enough to remember "Technocracy" with a capital T, that naive ideology celebrating Enlightenment confidence in reason. And what I was writing then sounds like what you are writing now. (Where have you been the past  $\frac{1}{2}$  century? I guess you've had the bad luck, which you call "good luck," of not having enough negative experience to sober your adolescent enthusiasm for "solid anchorage" in science.)
2. The tone of your essay suggests you've been tone-deaf to messages from beyond (though, thank God, not so much as to quell your sense of wonder, without which religion--and humanity--is demonic). Perhaps I could hear because blessed with badder luck than you; anyway, 9 Mar 34 I got "from beyond" the paradoxical message that God, who died/rose in Jesus, loves creation in general and me in particular (though not specially!); and never since have I had a day I didn't dedicate to God in gratitude for this message (unlike your "unfocused gratitude"). My message to you is that it's never too late to focus your gratitude; that's one thing Sunday worship in a million churches is for. And then there's taking another look at history's most powerful and luminous Book, in which Jesus says (Matthew 12.39 and parallels) the only sign you're going to get is "the sign of Jonah."
3. You and I are fellow-fighters against fanaticisms that disdain reason: that's the balancing truth to the fact that I fight against your naive confidence in, near worship of, reason. Further, you'll agree with me that it's inhuman and self-destructive to fail to doubt: one characteristic of maturity is the internalization of the faith/doubt dialog--and another is the parallel internalization of the doubt/doubt dialog (i.e., going on to doubt your doubts, a step adolescent confidence in a Newton-stable "universe" does not take).
4. Your philosophy celebrates two constants: "nature" as stable, and yourself in control of yourself. These are the two pillars of ancient Stoicism, the noblest intellectual opponent of early Christianity. You claim that even if you were to get a message from beyond calling on you to "repent of my evil ways," you'd be in charge--you'd "transform myself." Here may be a clue to what appears to me a wilful deafness, for the Bible rules out self-transformation: we are transformed, if ever and at all, by (one expression for it) "the grace of God," i.e., by God, not by ourselves. Without that credit line, you can't possibly feel how arrogant you seem to someone with that credit line. And arrogance is itself a deafness and blindness.
5. Every sophisticated person has (I say, by the will of God) an atheist within, and some (including me) have, in addition, a theist within. Before I took a U. of Chicago PhD I was an enemy of Eric Hoffer's "true believer," including the true believer in "nature" (whatever that means: the word developed as the dialectical antonym for "God," without whom it absorbs the divine into itself in a neo-nature-worship, which your essay exhibits). At U. of Ch. I came to know many of the "fathers of the atom bomb" and was hit by the FBI as a possible leaker. Well might Oppenheimer quote Krishna: science, our friend, had become potentially the "destroyer of worlds." In you, I fail to find this post-atomic ambiguity about "science" and "reason." That's why you seem adolescently deaf.
6. No offense meant and, I hope, none taken. Feel good at least about my counting you worth my giving you the time of day!