

See Also: Opposing & Creating -- The twin tasks of a movement, by Sam Smith
and
Introduction to *Why Bother? Getting A Life In A Locked-Down Land* by Sam Smith (2001)

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Politics, Discouragement and Despair

by Sam Smith

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UNDERNEWS is the online report of the *The Progressive Review*, edited by Sam Smith, who has covered Washington under nine presidents and edited alternative journals since 1964.

THE ELECTION has spread discouragement and despair among many decent and thoughtful people. And for those in the business of pursuing the truth journalistically, there has been another blow: the suicide of investigative reporter Gary Webb, the victim of nasty malice by the major media for his expose of the complicity of the CIA in the drug trade. Your editor didn't know Webb but he did know two other men of admirable purpose who took their own lives: DC city council chair John Wilson and homeless activist Mitch Snyder. In each case it was not only a loss but a wound -- reminding one how thin the skin of psychological stability really is and how dangerous speaking truth to power can be. It is a subject I addressed in my book, "*Why Bother?*" and may be of interest to readers as they cope with the present unhappiness. Here are a few excerpts:

SAM SMITH, WHY BOTHER? -- About a half million Americans are treated in emergency rooms each year after trying to kill themselves . . . If one comes down off the bridge (metaphorical or real) and resumes endlessly pushing the stone up the hill so it can roll back down again, you find yourself once more living with the inexplicable, the insoluble, the absurd. Camus pulled no punches on this score: "Living the absurd . . . means a total lack of hope (which is not the same as despair), a permanent rejection (which is not the same as renunciation), and a conscious dissatisfaction (which is not the same as juvenile anxiety)."

Can we handle it? Or do we escape by saving our bodies and letting our soul and minds leap for us? Do we become among those who, as Benjamin Franklin suggested, die at 25 but aren't buried until they are 70?

Camus and Kierkegaard are called existentialists. When you see that term these days it is often moored alongside another: angst. To suffer public angst or ask deep questions without good answers is to be a bit quaint and out of touch . . . In fact, even to admit such doubts is a sign of weakness that might cost you a another date, if not a promotion or an election . . .

The most common reaction to despair may be no more dramatic than a sense of boredom, of apathy, and indifference. In many ways, this is precisely the response our culture would prefer. It makes us ideal consumers of experience and excitement and assures that we won't interfere with the flow of goods and services by introducing novel notions of how society might be better rearranged.

Or one might take that leap of faith towards something that protects us from the unknown. "Life is at the start a chaos in which one is lost," wrote Jose Ortega y Gasset: "The individual suspects this, but he is frightened at finding himself face to face with this terrible reality, and tries to cover it over with a curtain of fantasy, where everything is clear. It does not worry him that his 'ideas' are not true, he uses them as trenches for the defense of his existence, as scarecrows to frighten away reality."

And here lies the paradox of therapy or, as Ernest Becker calls it, psychological rebirth: "If you get rid of the four-layered neurotic shield, the armor that covers the characterological lie about life, how can you talk about 'enjoying' this Pyrrhic victory? The person gives up something restricting and illusory, it is true, but only to come face to face with something even more awful: genuine despair. Full humanness means full fear and trembling, at least some of the waking day. When you get a person to emerge into life, away from his dependencies, his automatic safety in the cloak of someone else's power, what joy can you promise him with the burden of his aloneness?"

You don't have to be a psychiatrist to confront this anomaly. I have spent my journalistic life attempting to tell people things that will help them understand what is really happening around them. Yet the closer I have come to succeeding, the more resistance I have found. For some, even asking hard questions is a suspect activity. And why not? After all I am stealing their scarecrows.

Consider, for example, the problem of discovering unpleasant truths about our land. If a revolution takes place in the forest and no one reports it, does it make a sound? If the second coming occurred tomorrow, would the media cover it? There seems little doubt but that the civil rights, peace, and women's movement would have had far less salutary outcomes had they been forced to confront today's media and the skill with which it ignores that [which] it doesn't like. Gone is the ground rule that once required social and political change to be covered -- even if the publisher didn't approve of it. Gone is the notion that if you made news, they would come. In an age of corporatist journalism, in which Peter Jennings has become the professional colleague of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck, it no longer matters. News is just another item in the multinational product line with little value outside of its contribution to market share and other corporate objectives.

Worse, it has become just about impossible to find anyone in power who is ashamed of this. In fact, it is just about impossible to find anyone in power who is ashamed of anything. For centuries, shame has been one of the most useful restraints on power. As Edmund Burke noted, "Whilst shame keeps its watch, virtue is not wholly extinguished in the heart." But one of the perks of contemporary power is to exist without shame.

Shame and its benign cousin, conscience, once served a less public but equally vital role. The belief that if one tried hard enough, you could draw clean water even from a seemingly dry well, kept many an activist striving beyond rational expectations.

But disillusionment set in. The civil rights activist John Lewis would later recall the attempt to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic convention: "This was the turning point for the civil rights movement. . . . Until then, despite every setback . . . the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen . . . We had played

by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had arrived at the door-step and found the door slammed in our face." The writer Dorothy Allison has also spoken of betrayed optimism: "I had the idea that if you took America and shook it really hard it would do the right thing."

As such possibilities faded we eventually found ourselves in a time when the concept of wrong was just one more social construct to be argued about on a talk show, one more small obstacle people put in your way on your climb to the top. The effect on efforts for change was like trying to bake bread without yeast . . .

The reporter risking status by telling the truth, the government official risking employment by exposing the wrong, the civic leader refusing to go with the flow -- these are all essential catalysts of change. A transformation in the order of things is not the product of immaculate conception; rather it is the end of something that starts with the willingness of just a few people to do something differently. There must then come a critical second wave of others stepping out of a character long enough to help something happen -- such as the white Mississippian who spoke out for civil rights, the housewife who read Betty Friedan and became a feminist, the parents of a gay son angered by the prejudice surrounding him. But for such dynamics to work there must be space for non-conformity and places for new ideas and the chance to be left alone by those who would manipulate, commodify, or destroy our every thought.

To be sure, thirty years ago some of those seeking change -- especially those demanding justice in the south -- found themselves confronted with far more life-threatening dangers than does today's cultural rebel. But on average, activists today face a more hostile media, a more repressive government, a more passive and defeated potential constituency, and an extraordinary competition for people's time and interest. One reason for this is that the dogs and clubs of Bull Connor's cops have been replaced by far more subtle stratagems. For example, if you choose to challenge authority, you may be labeled delusional, dangerous, or both. In recent years, both state and media have taken to dubbing someone a 'paranoid' or a 'conspiracy theorist' simply for not accepting the conventional wisdom about a politician or issue . . .

To view our times as decadent and dangerous, to mistrust the government, to imagine that those in power are not concerned with our best interests is not paranoid but perceptive; to be depressed, angry or confused about such things is not delusional but a sign of consciousness. Yet our culture suggests otherwise.

But if all this is true, then why not despair? The simple answer is this: despair is the suicide of imagination. Whatever reality presses upon us, there still remains the possibility of imagining something better, and in this dream remains the frontier of our humanity and its possibilities. To despair is to voluntarily close a door that has not yet shut. The task is to bear knowledge without it destroying ourselves, to challenge the wrong without ending up on its casualty list. "You don't have to change the world," the writer Colman McCarthy has argued. "Just keep the world from changing you."

Oddly, those who instinctively understand this best are often those who seem to have the least reason to do so -- survivors of abuse, oppression, and isolation who somehow discover

not so much how to beat the odds, but how to wriggle around them . . . These individuals move through life like a skilled mariner in a storm rather than as a victim at a sacrifice. Relatively unburdened by pointless and debilitating guilt about the past, uninterested in the endless regurgitation of the unalterable, they free themselves to concentrate upon the present and the future. They face the gale as a sturdy combatant rather than as cowering supplicant.

Judith Herman, a specialist in psychological trauma, says the most important principles of recovery for abused persons are "restoring power, choice, and control" and helping the abused reconnect with people who are important to them. In short: choice and community. Survivors understand this implicitly even if they can't or don't express it . . .

In *The Resilient Self*, Steven and Sybil Wolin list ways in which survivors reframe personal stories in order to rise above the troubles of their past: insight, independence, relationships, initiative, humor, creativity, and morality. Survivors often strike out on their own, find other adults to help them when their own family fails them, and reject their parents' image of themselves.

The book is not only a personal guide for those who are or would be survivors. It is, whether intended or not, also a political guide. After all, our country and culture often stand *in locus parentis* and many of the pathologies we associate with families are mirrored and magnified in the larger society. Yet when we seek political therapy we repeatedly run up against a damage model enticing or forcing whole communities or groups into victimhood and leading them towards blame or surrender rather than resilience.

If insight, independence, relationships, initiative, humor, creativity, and morality form sturdy support for personal resilience, might they not also serve us collectively as the abused offspring of a culture that is chronically drunk on its own power and conceits . . .

H. L. Mencken once said that the liberation of the human mind has best been furthered by those who "heaved dead cats into sanctuaries and then went roistering down the highways of the world, proving . . . that doubt, after all, was safe -- that the god in the sanctuary was a fraud."

Mencken made it sound easier than it is. It is a lifetime's work to clear away enough debris of fraudulent divinities, false premises, and fatuous fantasies to experience a glasnost of the soul, to strip away enough lies that have been painted on our minds, layer after layer, year after year, until we come to the bare walls of our being. Still, it is this exercise, however Sisyphean, that helps mightily to keep us human.

Inevitably such an effort initially produces not beauty or satisfaction, but merely a surface upon which we can work our will should we so choose, a barren facade empty of meaning, devoid of purpose, without rules or even clues to lead us forward. We stand before the wall as empty as it is.

It is at this moment that the deconstruction of mendacity and myth so often fail the social critic, cynic, and ironist -- the street person overdosed on experience, the college graduate overdosed on explanations, the journalist overdosed on revelation. This is the point at which it is too easy to wash one's hands and consider the job done. Hasta la vista, baby, see you

around the vortex of nothingness . . .

The problem, of course, is that void. How people handle it can be drastically different. One may leave us with seven books, the other with seven dead bodies. In either case, we can not stare life straight in the eye without pain and without some longing for certainties that once spared us that pain . . . That's why there are so many attempts to put the question marks safely back into the box, to recapture the illusion of security found in circumscribed knowledge, to shut down that fleeting moment of human existence in which at least some thought they could do the work of kings and gods, that glimpse of possibility we thought would be an endless future.

It is seductively attractive to return to certainty at whatever cost, to a time when one's every act carried its own explanation in the rules of the universe or of the system or of the village. From the Old Testament to neo-Nazism, humans have repeatedly found shelter in absolutes and there is nothing in our evolution to suggest we have lost the inclination, save during those extraordinary moments when a wanderer, a stranger, a rebel picks up some flotsam and says, "Hey, something's wrong here . . ." And those of us just standing around say, "You know, you've got something there." And we become truly human once more as we figure out for ourselves, and among ourselves, what to do about it.

No one seeks doubt, yet without it we become just one more coded creature moving through nature under perpetual instruction. Doubt is the price we pay for being able to think, play, pray and feel the way we wish, if, of course, we can decide what that is. Which is why freedom always has so many more questions than slavery. Which is why democracy is so noisy and messy and why love so often confounds us.

If we are not willing to surrender our freedom, then we must accept the hard work that holding on to it entails including the nagging sense that we may not be doing it right after all; that we may not be rewarded even if we do it right; and that we will never know whether we have or not.

Further, the universe is indeed indifferent to our troubles. If God or nature refuse to cheer or punish us for our mercies or misdemeanors, the job is left up to us. We thus find ourselves with the awesome problem of being responsible for our own existence . . .

Hectorated, treated, advised, instructed, and compelled at every turn, history's subjects may falter, lose heart, courage, or sense of direction. The larger society is then quick to blame, to translate survival systems of the weak into pathologies, and to indict as neurotic clear recognition of the human condition.

The safest defense against this is apathy, ignorance, or surrender. Adopt any of these strategies -- don't care, don't know or don't do -- and you will, in all likelihood, be considered normal. The only problem is that you will miss out on much of your life . . .

Says Ernest Becker:

"The defeat of despair is not mainly an intellectual problem for an active organism, but a problem of self-stimulation via movement. Beyond a given point man is not helped by more 'knowing,' but only by living and doing in a partly self-forgetful way. As Goethe put it, we must plunge into

experience and then reflect on the meaning of it. All reflection and no plunging drives us mad; all plunging and no reflection, and we are brutes." . . .

The existential spirit, its willingness to struggle in the dark to serve truth rather than power, to seek the hat trick of integrity, passion and rebellion, is peculiarly suited to our times. We need no more town meetings, no more expertise, no more public interest activists playing technocratic chess with government bureaucrats, no more changes in paragraph 324B of an ineffectual law, no more talking heads. Instead we need an uprising of the soul, that spirit which Aldous Huxley described as "irrelevant, irreverent, out of key with all that has gone before . . . Man's greatest strength is his capacity for irrelevance. In the midst of pestilences, wars and famines, he builds cathedrals; and a slave, he can think the irrelevant and unsuitable thought of a free man." . . .

John Adams described well the real nature of change. He wrote that the American Revolution "was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people . . . This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments and affections of the people was the real American Revolution."

The key to both a better future and our own continuous faith in one is the constant, conscious exercise of choice even in the face of absurdity, uncertainty and daunting odds. We are constantly led, coaxed and ordered away from such a practice. We are taught to respect power rather than conscience, the grand rather than the good, the acquisition rather than the discovery. The green glasses rather than our own unimpeded vision. Oz rather than Kansas.

Any effort on behalf of human or ecological justice and wisdom demands real courage rather than false optimism, and responsibility even in times of utter madness, even in times when decadence outpolls decency, even in times when responsibility itself is ridiculed as the archaic behavior of the weak and naïve.

There is far more to this than personal witness. In fact, it is when we learn to share our witness with others -- in politics, in music, in rebellion, in conversation, in love -- that what starts as singular testimony can end in mass transformation. Here then is the real possibility: that we are building something important even if it remains invisible to us. And here then is the real story: that even without the hope that such a thing is really happening there is nothing better for us to do than to act as if it is -- or could be.

Here is an approach of no excuses, no spectators, with plenty of doubt, plenty of questions, plenty of dissatisfaction. But ultimately a philosophy of peace and even joy because we will have thrown every inch and ounce of our being into what we are meant to be doing which is to decide what we are meant to be doing. And then to walk cheerfully over the face of the earth doing it.

ORDER *WHY BOTHER? GETTING A LIFE IN A LOCKED-DOWN LAND* at <http://prorev.com/order3.htm>

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