

# Tomorrow, as the Crow Flies

A blog

by

Andrew Oberg

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For free-thinkers everywhere

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*Notes, comments, and suggestions for further reading*

# Tomorrow, as the Crow Flies

## **On the absence of a soul**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 04/06/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“One of the greatest sources of human unhappiness has been the belief in an immortal soul, the belief that we all have something inside of us that does not die when our physical bodies do but continues on in one fashion or another. Now there have been cultures that have dealt with this better than others, the Indian subcontinent and the ancient Celts come to mind, with their beliefs in reincarnation and a cyclical nature of life that does not leave the notion of an individual’s soul, accepted by them as that notion was, in a permanent location. Rather they thought, and many in our modern world still think—but now of course spread out across a broad spectrum and no longer limited to specific cultures—that each person’s soul attains higher or lower rebirths depending on the type of life they are currently living. Actually, though, I’m not sure that the Celts had this level of sophistication, they may have

believed in a more direct and less detailed scheme of reincarnation where those who die are simply reborn in the same or a similar community some time later. Either way, those cultures with reincarnation traditions have certainly handled the idea of an immortal soul much better than those cultures who posit that each soul is born into this world once only, and after death attains to a *permanent position* either in some kind of heaven or some kind of hell, the type of heaven and hell also necessarily differing by culture. Islamic hell is a place of cold and ice, for example, whereas the Christians' is one of fire and sulfur. But they are both wrong, and their teachings are causing great suffering—and I tell you further that all such teachings cause great suffering. Now it may be that what we do in our lives, the nature of the lives we lead, has some kind of influence on other events in the universe—for all that exists is necessarily linked—but this teaching of an immortal soul possessed by every living person or even every living thing on the planet is simply not true and must be gotten rid of. We are creatures of the planet; we are products of the natural progression of evolution and are inextricably linked to the planet that gave rise to us. We are the earth looking at itself through our eyes. And what is the earth but simply a further product of the natural evolution of the solar system? Extend that thinking now to the galaxy, to our galaxy cluster, to our quadrant of space, out to the width of the whole universe itself. And of course you know that the universe also evolved through natural processes and is in fact heading towards its own slow death as constant expansion gradually weakens the force that gravity exerts until nothing can be held together any longer. The universe will whimper itself out like a rug with a loose thread that eventually pulls the whole thing apart. But this is no cause for concern, for when matter can no longer exist as matter it will still exist as energy. The pendulum will swing the other way until the right balance of forces have built up again and another big bang gives birth to another universe containing vast

amounts of matter. Einstein taught us this with his famous equation that too few of us understand properly:  $e=mc^2$ , energy is mass times the speed of light squared. But what is the point of all this? That indeed all is in a great cycle, and we are part of that cycle, but that cycle is *natural* and not *supernatural*. We will live forever only in the sense that our organic matter is part of the great pool of matter that composes this planet and its myriad environments, and this planet is in turn part of the pool of matter that composes this solar system, and so on and so forth all the way out until the universe dies and is reborn churning all of that matter over into new forms, however similar those forms may or may not be. And when we die—remember this and may it give you strength—when we die our organic matter will dissolve back into the planet that gave rise to it and with that organic matter will go our consciousnesses. Because really that’s what all this soul nonsense is about, isn’t it? The fact that people have mistakenly believed that because they have a consciousness that acts separately from the automatic functions of their bodies, and can even direct functions of the body, that there is something special and altogether inorganic dwelling within them. This is a falsity. It is simply not true. Our consciousnesses are a natural outcome of the way our brains function. And our brains, as you know, are collections of nerves and synapses, sending and receiving signals from the body, giving orders, managing processes, all of the things we know that our bodies do without our having to think about them. But our thinking processes—our planning for the future, our memories of past events, our dwelling on things people have said or done about us, to us, or to each other—all of those things are simply other functions of our organic brains. Certainly this type of work is done in other parts of the brain than the more automatic work, but all of it arises naturally from the single organ we so affectionately call our ‘grey matter’. There is no special housing of an immortal soul in a little gland as Descartes proposed. There is

no ghostly shimmering matter that looks exactly like a transparent version of us like you see in cartoons. There is no magnificent seed that shoots off into a ray of light to enjoy the fruits of our positive balance of good works or suffer the punishment of our negative balance of bad works before being reborn higher or lower on the chain. In fact, there is nothing special about us at all. We are creatures of the planet, let me say it again, just like that tree over there that we all think has some mystic meaning just because it looks different. I tell you that that tree isn't different, not in a fundamental sense. And neither are we nor this rock nor that clump of dirt nor that flower nor that bird flying overhead. We are creatures of the planet, nothing more and nothing less.

Now, with that settled, let me talk just a little bit more. I've gotten sidetracked again as I find so easy to do these days. Something about aging maybe, I don't know and it doesn't matter. What does matter is the tremendous suffering that this ridiculous belief in an eternal soul has wrought all over the planet and all through history. The notion that some bit of us will survive our natural deaths has led people to do all sorts of terrible things to themselves and to others. It has led to the wide-scale, and even, in extreme cases, the wholesale devaluation of life. There have been entire cultures that have willingly sacrificed themselves in the belief that they will attain some kind of vast reward in the afterlife. Nonsense! There is no afterlife and this is a wonderfully freeing truth, one of a very few that can really be called a hard truth. This life now is all we have. Now I have just said that the universe is in a vast cycle of death and rebirth, or rather, creation and dissolution. This is also true, and in some sense we will live eternally because our matter will join with other matter which will eventually become energy and then matter again. But our consciousnesses won't go anywhere after our brain stops working, and that's the point, that's what people think is their soul anyway, whether they recognize it as such or not. Those poor individuals who

are actually able to convince themselves, or worse, have been brainwashed into the belief by their parents—who probably did so with the best of intentions—that there is an afterlife, an *eternal* repository for their souls, are causing extreme mental anguish for themselves in that they are placing their focus and meaning on what is *yet to come* rather than *what is*. What's the problem with this, some will ask. The problem rests in the matter of priorities. By placing their focus, their higher prioritization, on some imagined expectation, they are changing the way they view not only their own lives but those of everyone else. I am not the first one to say this and it's high time we all learned it. When you truly believe that after death the essence of who you are will continue to exist in some real way—and that essence will either be punished or rewarded—then all of your life becomes focused on that end. Some say this is a good thing, this will make people live better lives and give them hope for the future; but I say that is merely fool's gold. This belief makes people live more selfish and less meaningful lives. On the less damaging end it creates a sense of indifference: 'What does it matter if I can't achieve my goals? I'll be rewarded in heaven with something better.' 'My society is unjust and persecutes a certain minority? Oh well, they'll be rewarded when they die and I'll be in a better place when I do.' 'Modern industry is chewing through resources at an irreplaceable rate and causing mass extinctions of species? Well, God put those things here for us to use, and after all heaven will never run out of anything we need to make us happy once we die and get there. And maybe God will just snap his magic fingers and make a new planet.' Nonsense! And what's worse, educated people actually believe this drivel. On the more damaging end of the spectrum this belief in an afterlife devalues the lives of oneself and others: 'My life now is just a portal into eternity, therefore I'll sacrifice myself to some great cause in order to secure a better place in eternity.' 'My enemy is causing me grief, but his life is only temporary so if he should die or become ill, it will benefit me and not harm him all that much.' 'Our

culture has moved into an area and slaughtered an older and pre-existing culture, but they will continue on in their heaven so what we do to them here on earth doesn't matter.' Nonsense! And what are still worse are those groups that believe all but themselves will end up in an eternal *hell*. Can you imagine how warped a mind must be to complacently accept that everyone not adhering to their specific belief system will *live eternally in an horrific hell of endless torment* and still be able to go to work everyday and interact with people somewhat normally? Have they no compassion at all? It is an immensely saddening thought. Now, as for the belief in a soul contributing to positive moral behavior in the hopes of gaining a better reward in the afterlife, I ask you: How moral can such behavior actually be when it is done for the selfish pursuit of a reward later? This is why people return lost wallets and then stand there with their hands out. By positing that every good deed will be rewarded in heaven and every bad or unforgiven deed punished in hell these teachings set up a constant expectation of reward. Even if they also instruct their followers that good deeds should be done with no earthly expectations attached, the reward in heaven is still always dangling out there like a carrot on a stick and remains steadfastly ingrained in the subconscious. In this way good is done, whether overtly or not, with ultimately self-serving motivations at heart, namely, the motivation of being rewarded. The good done to others that stems from this place in the psyche cannot be called truly moral as it has its roots in selfishness. It is at best neither moral nor immoral, and at worst it is false good done either for the benefit to social standing it will bring—looking better in front of others—or for the imagined benefit it will bring after death—these so-called rewards in heaven. Helping your fellow human beings shouldn't necessitate a reward. Helping living creatures, human or not, should be something that comes naturally to all of us. Where is our respect for life? Where is our empathy for creatures in need? It has been dissipated by the teaching that we have a soul and that that soul will continue eternally.

This has taken us from here to ‘there’—and ‘there’ doesn’t even exist! We have traded our brother and sisterhood with this planet and all that dwell on it with us for the fanciful teachings of fairytales. We are products of the planet, and cannot live in mutual respect for it and each other until we face up to that and rid ourselves of this notion of a soul. Let me say it again: You don’t have a soul, there is no afterlife, you are completely free, and there is nothing to fear.”

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I remember this lecture well. We were hiking that day, it was a warm fall afternoon and the leaves were brilliantly orange, red, and yellow. We had stopped to admire a tree that had grown somewhat unusually. On the face of things, the tree appeared to be dead, fallen across the path and with its roots visibly sticking out in all directions from its upturned base. But on closer inspection we could see that some of the roots had in fact remained in the ground, and the bigger and lower branches had grown thick and tall, becoming secondary trunks of their own with smaller branches extending horizontally from them. It was an awe-inspiring sight, this tree that embraced life to its fullest and would not let go until the very end. We all gathered around and oohed and ahed for a while, the Great Teacher smiling to himself as he admired the tree with us before he took a few more steps up the path. He stopped suddenly, turned around, and with a twinkle in those black eyes of his came back down to stand behind the tree. He was very passionate, waving his own wiry branches in all directions as he delivered the speech posted here. As I recall, and as my recording confirms, he hardly stopped for breath, this all just came out of him in an instant of brilliance. A moment or two after he finished one of us asked him how we should think of the dead if nothing of them remained, and he said simply, “Treasure their memories as you treasure the living.”

I was thrilled to find this file again when I was going through my mp3s, and on listening and re-listening to it I think it's easy to see why it's one of my favorites. That's the main reason I wanted to start the blog with this talk, and also because I think this is really one of the more crucial teachings he gave us. If you can't get this into your skull, a lot of the other stuff won't make much sense. And there's a lot of other stuff! Much more to come so visit often and comments are naturally always welcome.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *life affirming, no afterlife, no soul* |  
*2 Comments*

Captainjack says:

Posted 04/09/2011 at 5:23pm

booooooring way too long man and who cares about some great teacher i gotta nuff teachers in my life lol!

SusieCue says:

Posted 04/10/2011 at 10:40am

Just stumbled across this and LOVE it! When are you going to post more? Is this going to be regularly updated?

## **On human nature**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 04/13/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“Young Tom asked me to say a few words about human nature. I wonder what in his nature prompted such a question? I think it should be fairly obvious to all of you that at heart, and by this of course I mean at our deepest psychic roots—our primal subconscious, if you will—people are naturally good-natured. Just take a look at yourselves. Before any of you started following me around pestering me with your endless questions and queries you were complete strangers. Then one by one you joined this little merry group of ours and soon had to figure out how to get along with each other. Did you have any trouble? Yes. I remember a number of times where I came close to scurrying away in the dead of night and leaving you all to your own devices—or would you prefer I say ‘flew away’? I know the nickname you’ve given me. At any rate, you had your troubles, and you’ll have more. People

can sometimes irritate each other, and no two personalities are an exact fit, I don't care how many romance novels you've read. But what happened after your tempers flared and angry words were spoken? Were fists clenched? Were bones broken? No. *Things* were broken, I recall a certain favorite mug of one of yours that was hurled to the cement by its very owner, but no direct physical violence occurred. Why was that? Why will that continue to be? It's because we are more civilized than our forebears of eons ago on the one hand, but also because of the positive group atmosphere we have managed to foster. I'll get to our forebears in a moment, but for now let's explore our group dynamics a little. We came together as strangers, one by one, and learned to live with each other. We camp, we stay in hotels, motels, we sleep under the stars, we wander and wander and wander because I don't have a home and you all persist in crowding in on me. You go where I go because you seek my wisdom, and I freely give of my abundance. I ask for nothing in return yet you are all more than happy to give. What's more, you are all more than happy to give to one another. Why is that? We have become a group, and we are not exclusive. I wonder though, what would happen if a number of people double your own were to suddenly try to join us at once? Or even triple? I doubt that you would accept that flood, for it would not be possible for you to control the environment they were joining. No, I think that you would reject all of them. But one or two more at a time and things seem to work... Hmmmm. Well, so we have become a group, and created a group atmosphere. You have bonded together and consider yourselves part of an inner circle; and those whom we meet on the road—in restaurants and coffee shops, passersby and the endless line of drivers—are part of that great out-group of 'everyone else'. We humans are social creatures. We are hyper-social creatures. We crave groups, we crave belonging, we crave interacting with our own kind on a limited scale, and the protection that living in small groups brings. This structure assures us of

stability. More than once you have split off into pairs and foraged grand meals for us from the abundance of nature. Even today it is possible to live off the land if your numbers are small enough and all of your group's members are willing to pitch in. You have all learned that, and none of you have stolen from each other or caused physical harm to each other or looked the other way while one of you suffered. Your true natures have come out, the natures that were there all along and showed themselves in endless ways to your family and friends long before you started following me. And why was that? Because *they* were part of your in-group. And they still are; the difference now is that this current group supersedes them as we are all living together and interacting daily. Even your old co-workers were part of your in-group. Remember that spirit of camaraderie you felt when working together on a project? Or the joy you shared when your company bested a rival company? Those are the same feelings you have now with each other—feelings fueled by the needs of belonging and security that are natural to all of us. It's in our DNA. It's a large reason why our species has not only survived but *thrived*. Look at us as we rule the planet! But now look at how quickly those group feelings turn ugly when they manifest themselves as nationalism, as racism, as sexism, as us-versus-themism. Our natural inclination to help one another and provide one another with the tools necessary for all to survive and to live in ever improving conditions can so easily be warped into something dreadful, into something that causes us to *kill*, to *steal*, to *pillage and rape*. Our lust for power rages as our group's strength brutally and mercilessly pounds our foes into the dirt. But wait! Those foes look just like us, they speak our language, they share our culture, they were our *neighbors* before all this began. What happened? Our group grew too large and became a victim of its own culture.

Let's now examine this idea of culture and we'll see if along the way we can't understand why we're more civilized than those forebears I mentioned earlier. The main point here, one that is really far too seldom thought about, is the incredible plasticity of the human mind. Our brains are in constant states of growth and reorganization. A great many people are under the mistaken impression that the brain stops growing, that it stops changing after an individual has gone through puberty. But this is not the case, and can easily be demonstrated by the simple illustration of how memories are formed. When we learn something new, our brains automatically create a little blob of neural tissue and a context signal that goes with it. As that bit of information becomes stored more securely—say through repetition—that connection between the tissue and the signal becomes stronger and more embedded in the brain's overall network. Imagine it like little towers of tissue being built in your brain. This is clearly change occurring, *physical ongoing change* happening in adult brains. So what exactly does this demonstrate? Only that our brains build memory towers in themselves but are otherwise static? Of course not, this demonstrates that our brains are flexible, that they are capable of forming new structures within themselves and adapting to new information, to new conditions, to new environments. This is precisely what I just mentioned, our mental plasticity. Our minds can be molded, and more often than not, the pressures that do so come from the outside and we respond to them through adaptation. This is why people are usually, more or less, able to fit into new places and new groups of people. Were any one of us to uproot and move to the other side of the world we would eventually find our little niche in our new home and figure out how to get along with our new neighbors and interact with our new society at large. We may never become fluent in their language, and we may never acquire the same mannerisms they have, or be able to view the world in the same way they do, but we would approximate all of

these things. Depending on our inclination we would either only seek survival skills in our new land or we would make the further efforts necessary to really try and fit in, to become a fully functioning member of that society, of that culture. And this would change us. We would become different people than we are today, with slightly different personalities than we have now, caused by our new outlook on the world. We would retain much of our birth culture, naturally, particularly if we moved to the new area after reaching adulthood, but slowly and surely we would shift to varying degrees of being both a Birth Culture person and a New Culture person. Different people will approach this differently; some will try to cling to their old ways while others will try to actually *become* a person of the new area, but all will find a balance and be molded into something altogether separate from what they were. There will be no clear delineation, no line that can be drawn between old and new, for we will always retain elements of both, but we will also *become* both simultaneously. A blend that truly belongs to neither culture but to a third, a person who treads the middle path and sees all sides, the positive elements as well as the negative of each. And so what? I'm sure Tom is wishing he'd never asked his question. So this: We are shaped by the cultures that surround us. Just as our brains physically change to form new memories, so the environment that we are born into changes our minds into a product of itself. Human beings are human beings; there is nothing in the DNA of a Spainard that makes him look at the world differently than an Indonesian. Obviously the two will approach any given situation in the ways they have been brought up to approach them. The Spainard will have been taught to say 'this is right and this is wrong' about something that the Indonesian would say 'this is wrong and this is right', or that they're both wrong and neither right, or the opposite, or indifference, or murderous rage towards one and passionate love towards the other. They are both simply *shaped humans*, formed

and molded in ways they could not perceive as children, and since this brainwashing is so complete—for that is what it is, let us make no bones about it—they will likely not even bother to question the ways they have been raised upon reaching adulthood. Once we have acquired the analytical skills and rational prowess to ascertain how we have been influenced, how we have been *made* by our cultures, it is already too late and it won't even occur to ninety-nine percent of us to question why we are the way we are. This is one reason why patriotism is so dangerous and such a ridiculous feeling. Go to war for a culture that you did not choose to be born into and that then applied constant pressure to make you a product of itself? Kill strangers on the command of another stranger who happens to be the nominal leader of the land you live in, that has been arbitrarily assigned borders through the centuries and whose borders are now in dispute due to some resource being found somewhere, for no benefit to you or your loved ones? Sacrifice this one precious life you have so the wealthy in the land you inhabit can increase their wealth at the expense of others inhabiting another land? It is pure absurdity, and no one will recognize it as such because we all have been blinded by the cultures that we have accidentally been born into. This of course gives great power to cultures, and some have made tremendous use of it; Rome especially comes to mind. The General Pompey once famously set sail in the middle of a storm to deliver food to Rome, naturally against the wishes of his crew, with the quip that it was necessary to sail but not to live. The city was worth more than their lives. And what was the city? An idea of greatness, a cause they could pledge their lives to and feel fulfillment as members of. But now I ask you, as products of your own modern cultures, would you die for your city? Why? Would you die for your country? Why? What is your city? What is your country? And now to the hardest question: Would you die for your loved ones? Would you die for the *idea* of your loved ones? These are issues that you must answer

for yourselves, I cannot tell you what to think here. But I can tell you that you should first seek what meaning these terms have for you, and start by forgetting the answers you have been fed from childhood. We are victims of our cultures in the same way that we are products of them—and when dealing with others it is best to always remember that—but we must rise above this victimhood. We are *human beings* and that is a wonderful thing. We can figure out for ourselves what is best and do not need to be told what to do by our cultures, or even the micro-cultures of our regions, our cities, our companies, our social groups, our families, our *teachers*. If any of you simply listen to what I have to say without dwelling on these things for yourselves, you would be better off sitting and zoning out to your TV sets. Let's use these brains of ours, please!

One final word on culture. How do cultures form? Why do they change over time? Why do they differ from one place to the next? Cultures are basically the outcome of long experimentation by a people to learn how to live with one another given the environmental pressures they face. The climate a people finds itself in most definitely exerts quite a lot of influence on the culture that people creates. But of course change is the only real constant in this universe of ours, and as time goes on cultures adapt just like individuals do. Perhaps this is why we are all less prone to violence than our ancestors. On the whole, we are learning that violence solves little; it simply does not work in the long run. Some cultures are learning this more quickly than others, and some have taken it to heart more than others, but what is interesting is that we as a species seem to be discovering this. Maybe we're learning from our experiences—I would certainly like to think so. Maybe our continued evolution is playing a part in this—I would say that's more than likely. But the bottom line on human nature is that we are all basically good at heart, we want to help each other and have positive social interactions, we want to grow and thrive

together, we want to be well fed, comfortable, and happy. These are natural and very excellent motivations. We are all also very adaptable, subject to the forces around us, and prone to accept the things we have been raised to believe without question. In this way we can oh so easily be manipulated, and that is why we must always be on our guard against those who would control us mentally, especially those who are within our own cultures—those that some would call their ‘fellow countrymen’. We are most vulnerable to them, and the power hungry among them know that best. Be yourself, think for yourself, and approach every person on the planet as another individual, not as a representative of a group—for they are victims of their cultures and subcultures just like we are.”

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He actually lost a few followers after this. I’m not sure if the Teacher even noticed, and if he did, he certainly didn’t seem to care. You see, the thing with him was that he never sought any of us out, never tried to get more followers. We all just kind of clung to him one by one until there was a sizeable group of us. I was one of the first to start following him, and I only ended up doing so because I overheard him talking to someone and wanted to hear more. I asked his conversation partner at the time how I could and she told me that she was just following him around. She said to get some camping stuff together and meet her at a certain bus stop the next morning. I did, and sure enough there she was, telling me to hurry so that we could catch up to him. The Teacher never consulted any of us about where to go next or what to do, not then in the beginning and certainly not later on. He would just wake up in the morning, pack up his tent or his put his things away into his bag, and then after a light breakfast he’d start walking somewhere. Over time we all got used to this, and we always helped each other

out if someone slept in, but there were a few times in the early days that we nearly missed him and got left behind.

Anyway, after this talk a few people were so offended that they quit that day. I guess their problems were probably with his comments on nationalism and his questioning of the basic values we had all been raised on. They said goodbye to the rest of us, and a couple of them even tried to get others to stop following the Teacher along with them, but they didn't say anything to Ogden directly. I imagine that if they had he would've just ignored them or given them a tongue-lashing. Not Young Tom, though. He actually really took this to heart, and a couple of months later when it was all over he told me that this lecture had been a real turning point in his life, more so than any of the others along the way. I wonder what he's up to now?

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *culture, human nature, questioning beliefs* | *1 Comment*

BobReynolds says:

Posted 04/13/2011 at 9:35pm

I don't know who you are, sir, and I've never heard of this teacher of yours, but I'm afraid you're both very wrong about people. I've lived a long time and seen a lot of shit in my days, and I can tell you that people are most definitely not good. People are evil and they will take what they can and hurt others when they can and never think twice about it. People only look out for themselves and generally don't even give a damn about their own mothers. They'll stab you in the back the first chance they get. People need to be kept in line and religion and fear of punishment are the only real tools for it. There, I've said my piece and I don't need to say more.

## **On consumerism**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 04/20/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“We buy and buy and buy. We run around hither and dither like we’re on some mad chase, grabbing now this and now that, racing for the cash register with both arms stuffed, clutching onto our soon-to-be possessions like crazed mother hens. And what drives us to this? What makes us so slavishly devoted to spending our hard-earned cash as quickly as it’s given to us? Partly it’s a need for status, partly it’s a fix, and mostly it’s training.

It’s in our nature to try and outdo those around us, and if you think about it from a biological standpoint it makes perfect sense. The most ornate peacock gets chosen to mate with and therefore ensures his survival by passing on his genes. The whole process is entirely subconscious, of course; peacocks don’t strut about overtly thinking that they want to pass on their DNA—rather their minds

are filled with the burning physical drive they have to put their *peacock* into an accepting female peafowl. Some examples of nature's ostentatiousness are so extreme as to actually be physically disadvantageous to their bearers except in the one case of attracting a mate. The Argus comes to mind as long as we're talking about birds and tails, as do certain trends in body piercing and other ornamentations, as long as we're talking about being physically disadvantageous. You see—and this is something I've always tried to communicate to you all, though I'm not sure how well I've done—we humans are not nearly as special as we like to think we are. *We are animals*; we evolved through the very same processes that everything else on this planet did. We find ourselves at the top of the food chain now, but we always haven't and we may not yet again. The world, the universe, is in a state of constant change—as is every cell in our bodies. So let's give ourselves some perspective and see that our needs to have an oversized yacht, a luxury car, a house with three empty *storage* rooms, have their roots in the same place as the peacock's tail feathers. We give ourselves far too much credit when we think that our hoarding, however sophisticated it may be, signals something more than a giant arrow pointing at our genitals. But you know all this already—it's an elementary observation. We want to be seen to be at least as good as those around us, and not just to pass on our genes, either. We are hyper-social creatures, and a large part of what that entails is finding our place within the social hierarchy. Even in societies that emphasize egalitarianism there is still a strong element of class and social standing. If your house is much smaller than those around it, if your car is far older than your neighbors', if your children are dressed in shabbier clothing without the extra strips of cotton emblazoned with some designer's label, then your standing socially suffers and you are demoted in the eyes of your peers. If left unchecked, this could lead to being shunned, and in certain cases could even cost you a promotion at work or acceptance into

an elite club, to name some comparatively milder consequences that we here in this country can no doubt relate to and may even find quite major. The forces that drive this need are real, they are evolved, they are natural, and they are most definitely something that we need to overcome. For this push to purchase and dispose, buy up and throw away, take in and chuck out, binge and purge, is not only harming our psyches, it's putting a tremendous burden on the planet's resources. And though this drive for status derived from possessions has probably been with us for a great while, at least since we started settling in places permanently following the agricultural revolution, it has reached a fever pitch in the decades since World War II and has taken on truly sinister proportions in our modern Internet Age.

I said that this drive is a natural one, an evolved one, but yet is still one that we need to overcome—and it is something that we can overcome—but what we must realize is that twenty-first century capitalism has blown it completely out of proportion and well beyond the natural scope that we've developed through evolution. It has created an *addiction* that gnaws at every one of us, and truly tormented me until I finally went cold turkey. It preys on us by tricking us, really, by abusing our natural endorphins and the mild pleasures that those hormones bring—processes meant to reinforce biologically advantageous actions. Why do you think we feel a kind of high after making a purchase? And the bigger we go, the more money we lay out, the bigger that high is. Feeding it becomes more than a desire, it becomes a *need* in the truest sense of the word. We cannot feel normal unless we've scratched that itch, unless we've fed our monkey and gotten that fix. Phffffff, uhhhhh, ohhhhh—oblivion. The sweet, sweet taste that we've been chasing, the kiss of the gods. You think that I exaggerate? You think that perhaps I've finally lost it and am now equating an impulse buy of some plastic toy that looks like a favorite cartoon character with

putting a spike into one of my mainlines and pushing that heroin into my brain? Well to me that's how we all appear! I see no difference between that addiction and this one—except of course in the matter of degree. But the need, the drive, the *desire for something outside of ourselves to fulfill ourselves* is the same. And it is equally dangerous, not just to all of us as individuals but to our whole human society. Our global society. Our future as a race really does depend on this—it is something we have to overcome! My brothers and sisters, I upbraid you and I scold you, I strike you with my words and scathe with you my looks, but you are all so much better than this, and I suspect that you know it. You who understand me, you who travel with me and attain the heights with me, you are products of the future, born before your time in order to birth it. Now see with me how horribly we've been treated! How far our minds have been twisted and abused; see, open your eyes and *see*, how everything our ancestors built has been hijacked for the grand purpose of brainwashing us from birth to feed this terrible system, this horrendous cycle, this insatiable beast that pins us down and tears at us and chews and chews and chews until we have no flavor left to give, no nutrition left to grant, and are fit only to be defecated out into our final resting place that is three quarters of a meter wide by three long and two deep in the ground. Our lives have been reduced to the meaningless garbage that we fill them with, and it is a terrible weight on the minds of a species that is far nobler than it allows itself to be. We are better than this, we are *human beings*, we are the most advanced animals on this planet, the best that this beautiful earth has produced, and yet we allow ourselves to be pushed around by such pathetic bullies. Really, this is something that we must overcome.

How are we trained to be like this? How has our nobility been robbed and our minds enslaved? How have we come to create societies and economies that are built on such wretched filth? The

answer is quite simple, really—we've been caught in our own trap, we've slipped into a hamster's wheel and keep running in the hope that somehow we'll escape. We're like a fly caught in a web whose struggles only serve to get it further entangled. Except that we no longer even realize that we're the fly—we think we're the spider! All this is of course quite by accident. The architects of this system thought that they were helping people; in their own ways and in the understanding afforded them by their times and education. We must always be careful when reading historic works to do so with a mind for the time they were written, past authors did not have the access to information that we have, they were not products of societies as advanced as ours—despite the great distance we still have to go human society *is* advancing—they were simply not able to read as widely as we can, and hence their thinking tended to be limited, they had blinders on that were no fault of their own. There were of course exceptions to this, great men and women whose minds transcended time and left the earth with beautiful gems, but even those rare geniuses had their faults and much of the time they were due to contemporary situations. At any rate, a system that was meant to increase human wealth generally, and provide a more comfortable life for everyone, has instead turned into a bittersweet poison that has eaten us from the inside out. I cannot believe that the economists, political philosophers, and thinkers extraordinaire that created this did so with some kind of evil agenda in mind, some kind of grand scheme to lessen and hobble us. Some, if not most, likely had no doubts that the systems they were putting forward would further enrich the wealthy of their time, and also probably hoped to benefit personally from such ventures, but my views on the innate goodness of human beings, and indeed of living beings, do not allow me to see them as malicious puppet-masters. To my mind this is where the communists and socialists get it wrong—there is no grand conspiracy, just sad people who have been fooled into thinking that money will solve all their

problems and have both the will and means to pursue personal profit at all costs. We all want to be happy, we all feel that we are suffering and want that to end. The great political philosophers of the left proposed their ideas, their communes, their government programs, their anarchic villages, with hearts full of love for their common humanity, even if many of them also allowed themselves to fall victim to anger and nursed black hatreds of all those whom they labeled bourgeoisie—my own heart, by the way, is firmly with the socialists—but those political philosophers of the right also proposed ideas and theories of governance with the best of intentions for all of society. They approached the world differently; they saw mistrust and fear in people where their left-leaning compatriots instead saw victims of poverty and maltreatment—people who have had chips embedded on their shoulders through life’s hardships. Both sides wanted a better future, both sides wanted happier people, both sides wanted a faster and more expansive progression of their cultures. And in the end it was capitalism of a quasi-controlled kind that wound up spreading furthest around the planet. In our times, anyway, let’s not fool ourselves and imagine that it’s always been this way and always will be. What we have now is a choice that we have all made collectively, and we most certainly can choose otherwise. So what happened? We created societies where freedom in business became equated with political freedom, the two became intertwined over generations to the point that people now actually believe that the freedom to build a convenience store next to another convenience store is just as valuable as the freedom to choose their own religion or compose poetry about any subject they want or discuss matters of state openly in public with their fellows. And this emphasis on business is of course just one symptom of the aforementioned need for possessions. All of these issues are connected; our version of capitalism, whose economic system is based on the spinning wheel of consumption and the constant profit it yields, cannot survive in a

controlled market because it needs us to constantly buy, buy, buy. It doesn't matter if we need the item in question or not, or even if we really want it, what matters is that we spend money somewhere on something and pass that money along to someone else who in turn spends it somewhere on something and passes it along. It sounds simple and in fact it is. The obvious side effect of this is that we have to *keep spending*. 'What? You already have a car? Well, get a new one!' 'What? You own enough clothing already? But those are last year's designs, you need new ones!' 'What? You're feeling a little thirsty? Well get away from that nasty water fountain and quench your dry throat with this sweet cola! It has the added benefit of not actually removing your thirst, a problem that's easily fixed with another cola!' You hear me, I know that you do, it all leads to a culture where wants, where *needs*, have to be manufactured. And we have let it get so bad that our entire popular culture is now based on this manufacturing of needs, and it is creeping into our public institutions as well. *That's* how we landed in this web. We've had plenty of chances to reform our system, to harness a bit of restraint to it or even alter it in significant fashions, and yet time after time our leaders have been persuaded, probably by monetary gains themselves—let's not forget that they too are products of the same system—not to make any real changes to the overall structure. The system has remained more or less the same, and we've no one to blame but ourselves. We could have pushed harder for real change if we had wanted it. But then again we're products of all this as well, aren't we? We grew up on the same putrid diet of commercials, infomercials, edumercials, slogans, jingles, bargain-busting prices and slashed innocence. It's a wonder we're not all broke! And of course many of us are—in debt up to our eyeballs and still on the hunt for the latest *thing*. We need to take a step back, we need to see this, we need to change our lifestyles for the good of our families, our societies, ourselves. We need to stop the cycle, our personal cycle, and then maybe we can

work on changing things in our communities, our cities, our states, provinces, prefectures, our nations, and our global society. We've been controlled by our desire for status, by feeding our addictions, by the subconscious training that none of us chose but we all underwent—but we don't have to be. Not any longer, we can take control. This is something that *we can overcome.*”

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The Teacher was largely preaching to the choir here. After all, those of us following him had basically dropped everything and just started walking. Some of us didn't even bother to quit their jobs, they simply stopped going and were no doubt eventually fired. I don't think the social analysis in this lecture is all that great, really. It's penetrating, certainly, but all of these things had been said before. I grew up reading a lot of political stuff from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and most of this had been said even way back then. I think the strength of this particular lecture can be found in the fact that it's a lot of what's already been said all put together into one neat package, and shot right through with compassion. The Great Teacher doesn't rail against anyone specifically or blame a group or way of thinking, he just says that we've built this terrible system and need to do something about it. And he tells us to start by doing something about ourselves. He was really great that way. He always wanted to give us hope and someplace practical to begin. He always embraced life and every neuron of him thought that deep down we're all pretty good. Truly good. And so of course we can do better than *this*, we can build better than *this*. On and on and always upwards, always better. Makes my eyes a bit moist to remember him this way.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *consumerism, cycle of economics, disposable goods* | *4 Comments*

Captainjack says:

Posted 04/21/2011 at 01:12am

i knew it communist!! man get your hands off my parents money thats for me to take lol! get a grip dude the revolution never happened

Freedom99 says:

Posted 04/21/2011 at 10:40am

Captainjack, if you don't have anything to say then feel free to shut your stupid mouth. This is an important topic and we should all think about it. He's wrong about socialism helping, history has proven how bad it is, but at least he's trying to talk about this stuff.

Captainjack says:

Posted 04/21/2011 at 9:50pm

shut up fool youre probably a pinko commy too and i hope you fall off a building somewhere

SusieCue says:

Posted 04/24/2011 at 5:23pm

Right on Teacher!

## **On the pitfalls of democracy**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 04/27/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

Before I get to the transcript of this lecture, let me preface it by saying that I don't agree with the Great Teacher here. Which is fine, of course. He always taught us to question everything and work things out for ourselves. He never once implied that we should take his words as some kind of scripture or revelation. In fact, he often told us explicitly not to. He was a mad prophet, there's no doubt about that, but he was a natural one and insisted on being taken that way. After all, he didn't believe in any gods or mystic divinations anyway, his metaphysics were simply physics. So I think he'd be okay with me putting this out there first: I think he's way off base here. But I'll save my objections to the details of this talk until you've read the content for yourselves, and then I'll make a few brief comments afterwards.

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“I heard you all talking last night about some upcoming election. How could I not? If you’re going to all gather in someone’s hotel room for a chat then at least choose someone’s room that isn’t adjacent to mine. You talked on and on endlessly, arguing about this and that, why one man was better than another, why one person’s policies were superior to his rivals. At first I listened with great interest—what did you all think about this circus? But as you went on and on I came to remember why I find all this so absurd. Not one of you changed your minds despite what was said. Not one of you even entertained what your fellows were saying, were offering; you all stood by your initial stances so steadfastly it would have made the titans holding up our earth proud. Don’t budge one iota or you’ll cause earthquakes! Utter nonsense! What’s the point in having a discussion if you aren’t even going to *entertain* a differing point of view? You all rambled on, talking over each other, cutting each other off, often not even bothering to respond to your partner’s point before continuing on with your rebuttal to what you *thought* he or she would say. You spoke in endless monologues together! You were all like some kind of gambling addict that was certain his number would come up if he just kept playing it long enough—don’t change for anything! Red 32 is bound to hit the jackpot sooner or later. I wished I could turn you all off, at least the TV has that advantage. So it’s only fair, in my eyes, that I ruin your lunchtime with my own rambling lecture on why democracy doesn’t work.

It sounds like a great idea; I’ll admit it. Power to the people, each person gets a vote and each person has their say. All votes are equal and it’s a simple matter of majority rule. And we think that our modern democracies are even better than those of the past since now everyone in society supposedly has equal input as the vote was extended to women, to racial minorities. As well it should

have been from the very beginning—humans are humans and if you're going to have a system where humans put little papers into boxes to make decisions, then of course all humans should be able to toss in their own little scraps. That is, if you think that this system has been worth having since its beginning. Which I don't. Democracy has served its purpose, certainly, it was a useful experiment in an alternative form of government, a nice idea that looked great on paper and in fact did do quite a lot to clean out the corruption that existed at the time. But now we've learned those lessons, we've moved forward and it's time for our governance to do so as well. For democracy has come to be just as corrupt and empty and ultimately *meaningless* in real terms as the systems of government it replaced. More meaningless, even, considering that at least those previous systems were able to get things done and actually govern. What we have now is a chamber of squawking monkeys that has even forgotten how to groom each other. Those darlings we send away to our capital cities are so blinded by their group associations and team interests that they can't even see the tasty insects living in the furs of the monkeys across the aisle from them. They think only the monkeys on their side have insects worth eating! And on top of this short-sighted focus on immediate political gain for their own side, they are deeply indebted to certain large donors who paid for their expensive election campaigns, and feel the further need to continue to curry favor with those deep pockets so that they can be re-elected by again pandering to the lowest common denominator and promising the moon—all to keep their cushy jobs that supply them with such wealth and prestige. And many of these so-called representatives aren't even properly educated! Anyone can run for elected office, no matter how prejudiced, self-serving, greedy, and xenophobic they've become. And a population that has also become prejudiced, self-serving, greedy, and xenophobic will happily elect those fake plastic trees to 'represent' them in office. Represent! I say steal their tax money

and ignore! The people many of our ‘representatives’ actually represent aren’t even from the places that elected them, they are moneyed interests that buy influence in government in order to increase their own profits, as I just said. It’s all part of this terrible emphasis on wealth that human cultures have fallen victim to for far too long. I must speak on this someday. But let me continue with my bashing of our ridiculous democracies.

So we elect these people and send them to the capital to represent us. They fall prey to lobbyists who in turn represent certain interest groups, they let their egos get the best of them, and they become pawns in a broader game of group politics between the various parties in government. This is all quite obvious and I’m certainly neither the first nor the last one to point these things out. Representative democracy does not work because the elected officials fail to actually represent their constituents. So some instead want to reform the system by taking money out of the equation or replacing the representative system with a direct democracy. Neither of those ideas will work either. Even if elections are publicly funded, such that no campaign donations can be accepted from anyone and all those running have equal time in the press and equal exposure to the voting public before the day votes are cast, we will still end up with corruption. Even if those elected never receive any payment at all from an interest group, they will still have the same problems of group association and issues of ego that come from the privileged position they have attained. And this will be even more of a problem if those elected have a lower level of education. If you want to be part of the government of a region, or especially a nation, a university degree is not enough. The mind needs more training, more discipline, and a deeper level of development than it can achieve only at the university graduate level. For most people that’s fine, of course, more than enough, but not for those who would wield the very

weighty reins of power. Our representatives are too many and far too mediocre. So some want to have a direct democracy? Where everyone votes on everything? This is possible, they say, because now we have the Internet and can also carry it around with us. Soon we'll even have it implanted in our brains and will have constant access to all the information we could ever hope to have simply by thinking out a net search and mentally absorbing the results of it, all without having to use our hands or manipulate some kind of tool. Whatever policy decisions need to be made can be done so via some website, and the majority opinion will finally be able to directly rule. Can you imagine such a system? This town's schools want to have more money for some program, so someone suggests raising taxes and giving more funding to them. There will be a vote on the issue in two weeks' time. Everyone goes about their lives, and when two weeks pass those who actually remember to vote—or care enough to vote—will be those that are either very opposed to the idea or very in favor of it. And then whichever side turns out to have the most people will dictate that policy to everyone, regardless of the actual needs involved or the veracity of the school program in question that started this whole process. And everyone will always have to vote on absolutely every little thing that comes up. What a nightmare that would be! Most people would very quickly become apathetic to the constant cries for this or that and voter turnout would no doubt be extremely low. What would we be left with? A group of self-appointed representatives, and the system would be no better than it is now. So they suggest forcing people to vote then? If someone doesn't vote they face time in prison or some other extreme punishment? Now we have our entire community constantly hassled by both the demands of policy decisions and the pressure to always click their votes in or face severe consequences. How could people even continue working and living normally? It would be a full-time job! And if we extend this system out of the local

sphere and onto the national level it's clear what a mess we'd have on our hands. No, neither reforms of representative democracy nor even the most fine-tuned direct democracy are practical or desirable options for governance given the negative aspects of each.

Nearly everyone today takes it for granted that democracy is the best possible way to run a government. This message is pounded into our brains from childhood the same way that consumerism and the need to constantly spend is. We are told time and again that our democratic systems are protecting our rights, giving us all a say in how our nations are run, empowering us and ensuring that our human rights are defended. The message is so loud and so constant that no one even stops to think about it. But the hard cold fact of the matter is that most people are neither inclined to participate in government nor even really capable of doing so. And that goes for me too, by the way, don't think that I view myself as some kind of benevolent dictator waiting to happen. But that is what we need, of sorts. We need a *professional cadre* of governors, a trained and highly specialized elite group that is entrusted with all the decisions of state, supported by similar regional and city groups. These councils that are mirrored at every point of organization from the highest national level all the way down would owe their allegiance to no one, would be self-perpetuating through the educational system, and would be composed of the absolute brightest and most capable individuals in society. Individuals who are also naturally inclined towards the desire to govern by their personalities. These corps would be small enough to limit the group politics that so easily emerge due to our social instincts, and although egos would no doubt come into play they too would be restrained by the need to reach consensus on policies to be enacted. These would be groups of people who truly want to rule *for the sake of those they rule*; supreme organizers who must of necessity also receive extensive training in humanistic philosophy and attain

mental discipline through meditation. People replete with wisdom and compassion; skilled analysts who think first, talk second, and act only if absolutely necessary. Light hands that are made of steel, able to guide a people, a culture, towards a more humane society that is equally just for all. Democracy does not allow this because it has far too many cracks that nefarious infiltrators can exploit—far too many points where influence can be exerted out of proportion—and puts power exactly where it should not be—in the hands of a disinterested public that would much rather be entertained than do the necessary research to make an informed decision about the course government policy should take. The public is not to blame for this—they have been made that way by their cultures, they are victims of those who would dumb them down and shut them up in order to profit from them—but nevertheless the point remains that the public is not fit to rule. It never has been and never will be; it is too diverse both in its natural abilities and personality traits. Government should be run by those who have an inborn capability for it that has been groomed by extensive training, and whose characters furthermore incline them towards it; characters that are then carefully molded to reach the pinnacle of personal discipline, to possess a deep compassion for all, and to be filled with a wisdom that has been born out of the ages of humanity's past.”

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I don't want to say too much here, but now that you've read what the Teacher had to say I do want to give my reasons for disagreeing with him. Basically I just don't think his alternative would work all that well. In later talks he gives more details about what system of government he'd like to live under and what he thinks would be better for everyone, and I guess you can decide for yourselves then (I should re-check my files for this). But with this

talk here I feel like his objections to democracy are issues that democracy can fix itself. I mean, his points about money and outside influence are good ones, sure, but those aren't reasons to toss the baby out with the bath water in my opinion. And I like voting. I think it's important and I'm happy to have my say. I think that people who run for office usually start out with good intentions and generally do try to do their best. I think it's fair too, even if a large part of the people who can vote never do. At least they can vote, which is something that for a long time no one could do. Sure, it's messy and our governments usually can't really get anything done, and one administration often undoes what the previous one did, but anyway we can always say that at least we chose them ourselves.

I can't remember where we were when he sat us down for this lecture, but I do remember that he was very subdued in manner that day. He was very much the gentle teacher that had something to offer. His chiding us for chatting away in the hotel room the night before was quite good-natured. At the time I'm sure I felt it wouldn't be appropriate to say anything at all against his ideas, so I kept quiet about my thoughts. He probably would've told me that I've been conditioned to think the way I do and should look at the issue objectively and without attachment to the ideals I was raised on. And he'd be right to tell me that even now, but I still somehow feel like democracy's our best option.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *democracy, government, problems with democracy* | *7 Comments*

Loopyloo says:

Posted 04/27/2011 at 2:30pm

Smells like someone's been smoking something whacky!

Captainjack says:

Posted 04/27/2011 at 9:06pm

haha loopy that's what i'm doing right now!

Freedom99 says:

Posted 04/28/2011 at 10:15am

Government has always been a problem. The best thing we can do is to limit it as much as possible. The Teacher is right about how bad it gets, but the answer is to get rid of it not to make it again in some new way. You all need to check out libertarianism, that's what I'm into and it's obviously the best way to go. The facts support this too, by the way.

BobReynolds says:

Posted 04/30/2011 at 8:40am

I'm afraid I have to disagree with your teacher again, sir. Too many people have died to protect democracy to get rid of it. But I agree with your feelings, John. It is the best option and it's the only damn way to get freedom, that's for sure. It just is.

Crossroads says:

Posted 05/01/2011 at 3:10pm

Nobody can have freedom without the Truth. It's all about Heaven, people!

Captainjack says:

Posted 05/02/2011 at 4:35pm

dude as soon as i can vote i'm totally going to vote naked hahahahahaha!

SusieCue says:

Posted 05/03/2011 at 7:35am

Oh, I don't like this one. Expressing ourselves is part of the universal way, us being our pieces of the grand cosmic order. We're like butterflies floating through space, and we've got to find our flowers. Democracy and love are our flowers!

## **On the nature of truth**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | Published: 05/04/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“Empirical truths, intuitive truths, revealed truths, metaphysical truths, rational truths, theoretical truths, emotional truths, truths by association, truths by default, truths by belief, truths by faith. The world is full of truths. Or rather, you would think so if you spent any time at all listening to people talk about the topic. The modern marketplaces are the coffee shops, the cafés, and the bars—to say nothing of Internet forums and feeds—you can go to those places and hear all sorts of things that you can’t normally hear elsewhere. Areas where people actually shop for daily goods, like we used to do at town markets, are silent and stale neon warehouses. But if you go to these places of chatter, these dens of colloquy, it isn’t hard to hear such emphatic expressions as, ‘And that’s the truth!’ Or, ‘the God honest truth’ or, ‘the absolute truth’. You can even hear certain fantasists insisting that their belief system is, ‘the one

and only highest truth’—they will sometimes even add the jurisdiction of this grand ultimacy, ‘the one and only universal highest truth’. Imagine that! Claiming that your bizarre and groundless belief system as expounded by an Iron Age text is the most significant truth in the entire universe. But that is how ridiculous even more minor claims of this vein sound, empty phrases such as, ‘It’s true!’ carry with them far too heavy a semantic load to justify the whimsy with which they are tossed about. The result of this is also far more serious than simply making the users of such phrases appear uneducated—it actually weakens the concept in both the speaker’s and the hearer’s minds. Truth is a powerful claim, an immense claim, a hammer-smashing-a-mountain-into-the-ground claim. *Real* truths can only be won by hard labor, by the blood, sweat, and tears of those who would seek them out. And even then they are subject to doubt, subject to lessen and fade with the passing of time, subject to be replaced by more *precise* truths. Or perhaps even more *profound* truths. Note that I did not say subject to be replaced by ‘better’ truths, for a truth once discovered is a truth regardless of the inadequacies of its expression, and the terms ‘better’ and ‘worse’ do not apply to the truth itself, but rather to the communication of that truth. I would have us be *precise*! I would have us be *profound*! And if we are to be then we must discipline our thinking, we must train our motor-mouths to use language properly and delicately, to cease bandying about such loaded terms as ‘truth’ and say *what we mean*, however we mean to say it. My teaching is that there is only one form of truth: the empirical. It alone can be demonstrated and therefore it alone can lay claim to the mighty throne of ‘truth’. Allow me now to expound, if you will; humor this old man a little.

Your parents no doubt taught you to always tell the truth when you were growing up. And I’m sure that even now in your adulthood they are in favor of your always being truthful—although they of

course understand that the world being what it is there are times when most people find it necessary to bend the truth, to omit the truth—or even to lie. This is not to justify those actions, nor to condemn them, merely to give a brief description of our modern conditions as we all know them to be. But what exactly did your parents mean by their instructions? They probably had in mind some general restrictions that they had placed upon you, and that they wanted to be sure you followed for your own safety, according to their best judgment. They may have told you to always look both ways before crossing the street, for instance. In such a case, the admonition to always tell the truth would be given following their briefing of you after you came home from playing outdoors. ‘Did you have a good time, Brenda?’ ‘Yes, mother.’ ‘Did you play nicely with the other girls?’ ‘Yes, of course mother.’ ‘And did you look both ways before crossing the street?’ ‘Yes, mother.’ ‘Tell the truth now.’ ‘Yes, mother.’ Things of this nature, played out a thousand times in a thousand households the world over. Probably much less formally than the example I just gave, but you see what I’m getting at. Your parents used the term ‘truth’ to ascertain your degree of obedience. Now let’s look at this a little more closely. What kind of ‘truth’ were they driving at? The empirical, of course. Whether you had actually looked both ways or not could be proven, or at least given a great degree of certainty. How is that possible? By corroboration. By witnesses who either saw you look both ways or not. And in the perhaps not too rare cases that there were no witnesses, a reasonable degree of certainty could be arrived at by analyzing your past behavior. How consistently did you perform this routine that your parents insisted on? Doing all of that is far too much effort, naturally, and so your parents chose the expedient method of simply reinforcing in you the rule of being *honest*, of telling the truth about your actions. This amounts to your giving accurate and factual reports of your actions—which are the twin hearts of empirical truth: accuracy and

factuality. Most cases of empirical truth are actually far clearer than little Brenda's crossing of the street. 'Objects fall to the ground when dropped' would be a case of an empirical truth, as would, 'The earth revolves around the sun.' These statements and others that are empirically true can be verified by observation, by experience, or both. These are cases where data is collected, analyzed, interpreted, and truths arrived at. These are cases of hard work, diligence, fastidiousness, and faultlessness. These are cases of the scientist triple and quadruple-checking his figures and formulae to be absolutely sure of their *exactness*. And when that is done another scientist will go over everything once more to verify the results. Only by undergoing such onerous processes as these can a real 'truth' be arrived at. Now at this point it's probably occurred to some of you to ask a very relevant question: What about those things that people do secretly? That they intentionally do in the absence of any observation, concealed and quiet? Are those things not actually true, in the definitional sense—in the *empirical* sense—since they did happen, but cannot be corroborated? I would say that they aren't true in the empirical sense simply because they cannot be verified either by observation or experience. Their consequences may be able to be experienced, however, and so in a sense actions such as these could be inferred, but do not carry the same weight as those we've been discussing so far. Although such actions do not qualify as being *empirically true*, are they not still true? What about self-corroboration? Could that not provide the basis for claims to truth in these cases? Again, I would argue against it, at least in the strictest sense of the word 'truth'—and by such I mean its purely definitional sense—my primary point again being that my teaching is that empirical truth *is* the definition of 'truth'—all others fall short of the mark. So why then cannot secretly done actions, supported by self-corroboratory evidence, be considered as candidates for such? This is due to the subjective nature by which we all view ourselves and

our actions, the *necessarily* subjective filters we all have. Every thought and action that we have has its roots in some desire of ours, some want or felt need that we are either acting on at the time or in the process of planning how we'll act on. Think about it. If we're walking down the street and we feel hungry, we begin to think about getting food. When we wake up in the morning we may plan how to best use our time that day to accomplish everything on our 'to-do' list. When we stub our toes on something we kick it in anger—why? As an unconscious reaction to being hurt and in the desire to avoid being hurt again, to *pay back* that object for hurting us so that the offense is not repeated. Since we are so occupied with ourselves, both mentally and physically—though I dislike that distinction since in fact our mentality is simply one function of our physical bodies—we do not have the ability to view ourselves purely objectively. No matter how rational and fair-minded we may be, we are biological creatures and will always have a bias regarding ourselves. Even the depressed have a bias towards themselves, though in their unfortunate cases it's a negative one. This lack of objectivity, this *inability* to be objective, means that those acts done in secret will be viewed slightly askew, a bit off from the way they actually happened, and due to this inaccuracy cannot be said to be entirely true. And should the action in question not succeed in being concealed, should it actually be seen by someone or should its results be verifiable in some way, then that action falls into the empirical category and can be said to be true.

Where do the faults lie with all these other so-called 'truths'? Why can they not also lay claim to being true in the only real, the only *meaningful*, sense of the term? The primary issue is of course that they are unverifiable. You can talk all you want about a magic man who lives in the sky and snaps his fingers and wiggles his toes to induce a volcano to erupt and wipe out an otherwise completely

innocent group of people who just happen to worship a variation of the magic man you do, but the fact of the matter is that it is all pure conjecture and will ever remain so. People speak of ‘proving’ a belief by their faith in it. This is the most ridiculous nonsense! How could a thinking mind ever spout such garbage? The poor people who are under such illusions are primarily so because they were brainwashed at childhood to accept all of the same jabberwocky that their parents were. This created a mental blindspot for them, such that although in most matters they are completely rational and sober individuals, when it comes to the faith that their parents *inflicted* on them their minds are constantly drunk, inhabiting some ludicrous fantasy land where the drinking of symbolic blood or the circumventing of some meteorite or the chanting of endless words in an ancient language somehow mystically empowers the doer with divine blessings. It’s absurd, their beliefs are even obscene. Why don’t they just spin around in circles until their oxygen-deprived brains induce hallucinations? Some of them do! These rituals have their place, they are beneficial for group cohesion—they even provide a purpose for living and a strong sense of community in many cases. But the beliefs themselves must be seen for what they are—wishful thinking and not anything near what can be labeled as ‘truth’. Adherents to such systems will tell you that they have experiential proof: one time a friend of theirs, or even they themselves, was praying so hard and so long that they ‘felt something’, that ‘God touched them’. I hope it wasn’t the hand of the priest! Such ‘proofs’ are just as valuable as my own that once after eating a huge meal of very spicy food I spent a long time on the toilet and during my travails the almighty Lady of Mars revealed herself to me and imparted the secret knowledge that we’ve had it wrong all along—men are from Venus and women are from Mars! It’s absolutely true, I assure you; I have the proof of my own experience which polite society now demands that you accept as valid and

completely worthy of being called ‘true’. What nonsense! How can anyone possibly think that my defecatory illusion is as credible as a statement whose veracity can actually be checked upon? To put my message of the Lady of Mars in the same category as, say, the law of gravity? But this is exactly what people are doing when they claim that their religious beliefs are grounded on the truth. And not only religious beliefs, people do this with politics as well. In those cases they will often resort to citing historical incidents as ‘proofs’ of the claimed truth value of their personal beliefs. Joseph Stalin sent millions to hard labor and often death in the Gulags, therefore communism is evil and all communists devalue people’s lives. In fact just the opposite is true, sincere communists have taken it upon themselves to seek the betterment of all human society; they are far closer to saints than demons, to use the Judaeo-Christian-Muslim analogy. Or that Margaret Thatcher successfully defended Britain’s claim to the Falkland Islands therefore her economic policies were sound and should be applied to the modern U.K. as well. All of these examples, and many, many more, are non sequiturs. They do not logically follow one from the other. They are arguments of convenience, or—probably more often—arguments of confused minds. Our societies have done a terrible job of training people how to think; they prefer instead to celebrate diversity to such a degree that all sorts of claptrap is accepted simply because it is ‘just their point of view’. Diversity is wonderful, as is tolerance for others, but by allowing people to label every little thing they fancy as being ‘true’ we have stolen the meaning from the word and watered down our own mental capacity for what is *actually true*. And what can actually be called ‘true’? Empirical truths. Verifiable, accurate, precise statements of observable phenomenon. Recall that earlier I said that empirical truths are those that can be observed or experienced, yet I stomped all over those who claim justification for their beliefs by claiming their own experience. There is a difference between the two types,

of course. The experiential evidence that is involved in an empirical truth can be experienced by *everyone*; gravity can be experienced in this way. Why don't we all run like lemmings off that cliff and see for ourselves? We don't need to; thankfully, we have experienced gravity many times over and know it to be true—in the actual meaning of 'true'. And also I would be saddened to no end to see all of us behaving like lemmings and throwing our lives away. So why do we let our minds behave like that? Why do we allow ourselves to mentally jump off cliffs all the time by accepting someone else's *personal experience*? I can guarantee you that no matter how much spicy food you eat, you will never have the same vision of the Lady of Mars that I had. It is the same with others who claim their experience as 'proof'—no matter how fervently that person believes in their own experience, the event was isolated, unrepeatable, and *unexperienceable* by others. Fellow believers in the same nonsense may claim having had similar experiences, but they will never be *precisely the same*, and therefore they can never be said to be verifiable. What gives a scientific experiment its power is that the same results can be arrived at by repeating the experiment. This is the meaning of verifiability, obviously. It is therefore my teaching that in order to be a truth something must be verifiable, and this testing of the value of the truth can be done in two ways: by observation or experience, repeatable and confirmable by anyone who wishes to do so. Any intuitive, revealed, abstract, emotional, even theoretical 'truths' cannot be given the label of 'true' until they have entered the empirical sphere. To do otherwise is to misuse the term and to strip it of its meaning.

What does this mean for us? How can we apply this to our lives? We see that there are no philosophical 'truths', there are no moral 'truths'. There is no 'one true way', 'one true path' upon which to tread this life of ours, for none of them can be justified in the

empirical sense. What is ‘ultimately true’ is only that which is based on a concrete, testable, and observable foundation. The earth revolves around the sun, stars can die in one of three ways, matter is composed of atoms, things of this nature. The lives that we choose to lead then can neither be said to be based on a ‘truth’ or on an ‘untruth’—in other words, a ‘lie’. There are lifestyles that are more or less advantageous given the kind of life one wants to lead and the external circumstances and times that one finds oneself in, but there is no ‘one right way’ to live. Notice that I did not say that some lifestyles are ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depending on the kind of life you desire to lead, for those are value-loaded terms and carry with them the danger of adding judgment where it does not belong. What does this teach us? Tolerance, of course. If there are no absolute ‘truths’ upon which we as humans must base our lives and life choices, then we should have a deep respect for others as each of us makes our own decisions about the kind of life we want to have. Should someone make disadvantageous choices, such as committing crimes, they will face the societal consequences of such based on the laws of the area they live in. But we can still respect them as a person. Should someone choose to believe in the Lady of Mars or a vengeful magic man, or even a loving magic man, we should respect them as well. They are human beings, they are fellow travelers on this planet, they are our brothers and sisters. But we should never allow them to make the claim that their beliefs are true, nor should we accept their attempts to proselytize based on their mistaken view of truth. The same goes for those who would force their political beliefs or other types of beliefs on others. What I am proposing is a deep level of *mutual respect* and a *recognition of what is actually true*. And truth, as we have seen, must be something that’s right on the nose.”

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I should point something out here that you'd miss otherwise. This last statement of the Great Teacher's was actually a very funny quip. He had this enormous nose that stuck out from his face like a beak. And in fact with his head jutting forwards the way it tended to when he was making a point, he looked a lot like a bird. So what he was doing here was really poking fun at himself and lightening the mood after such a serious talk.

This was another breakthrough lecture for him with a lot of us. He offended quite a few in our crowd, as I'm sure he meant to, but his points were so well made that even those who were offended felt like they needed to take a hard look at themselves and the things they believed in. Which is always something worth doing, if you ask me. Another positive upshot of this was that we were a lot more careful about our language. I mean, the way we said things. Well, I should say that we were a lot more careful when we remembered to be, but I'm sure you know how that is. I'm glad I posted this lecture today because these are truths that I need to be reminded of. Or have I misused 'truth'? ☺

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *beliefs, meaning of truth, verifiability* | *2 Comments*

Lucyssky says:

Posted 05/05/2011 at 1:16pm

There are some very interesting points here. However, if people think that their own beliefs are true in the real sense, then they will naturally try to convince others. Everyone would have to accept the Teacher's definition of truth for people to actually respect one another. Do you think people can do this? Can we all open our minds that much?

Crossroads says:

Posted 05/06/2011 at 4:50pm

Anyone who's really felt God knows him to be True. You just have to open your heart not your mind. Turn that off!

## **On issues of personal identity and community**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 05/11/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“Before you all started following me around, how did you think of yourselves? Were you businesspeople? Were you artists? Were you producers of goods? Were you retailers of goods? Were you students? Were you teachers? Were you fathers and mothers? Were you brothers and sisters? Were you friends and lovers? Were you mosque-church-temple goers? Were you conservative-liberal-green-independent voters? Were you free thinkers-intellectuals-refusalists? Were you patriots-nationalists-my country can beat up your countryists? Were you neither here nor there, drifting between roles and unsure of yourself? Were you *between things*? Were you *between your lives*? How can such a thing be possible? How can one be between oneself? It is sadly all too common an issue in our day and age, where we have been left to flounder in the great sea of choices that confront us from an early age and to which we

receive no training to handle. These are all issues of identity of course; how you view yourself, your sense of self-worth that comes from finding your appropriate place in society—your niche. Our sense of self-worth can of course come from other places, but primarily people seem to take it from how they view themselves vis-à-vis society at large—the function they have in the greater community. This is why people tend to ask, ‘What do you do?’ when they first meet each other; it is a stepping-stone for defining others, for gauging how you will interact with them. This tendency, I think, is merely one example of the prevalence of the importance people place on their role themselves. ‘I am a successful executive of company such-and-such, therefore I...’ and the like. By looking at ourselves through this filtered mirror, by taking our identities from the things we do, we give our sources of income, more often than not, fundamental positions in our views of self. This is extended to others, as I’ve been saying, by also applying the same criteria. If you meet someone who introduces themselves as a lifeguard, you’ll likely pursue a far different type of conversation than you would with someone who says they are a restaurant manager. As such, your mental image of that person will necessarily differ, starting with the original filter of the *job category* which that person self-applied. This categorization is a powerful evolutionary tool, and the brain’s default response to labeling things in the outside world it encounters, say, as ‘dangerous’ or ‘indifferent’ or ‘desirable/beneficial’, has come to be extended in this way to many more issues than it initially was. Where then does our personal identity come from? Does it have to be from our jobs? Or can we define ourselves in other ways? And what about those unfortunate people who are stuck in jobs that they would by no means use to define themselves? What are they to do? I think, as we shall see, that this last category of people is a vast one indeed, and the issue of identity has become a crucial one in our times.

Regarding the root of our identities—how we see ourselves, and by extension how we project ourselves to others—of course there can be many, many sources. And indeed, every person’s identity is an amalgamation of sorts; everyone quite naturally takes bits and pieces from here and there, external as well as internal. A bit of personality perhaps, a touch of a natural skill, the religious group that one adheres to, a feeling of pride in one’s ancestors—but by and large we define ourselves by what we do, how we earn our incomes. Why is this? Why is this such a natural tendency for people the world over, regardless of culture, language, or social structure? I think the primary reason here is again our hyper-socialness. We are social creatures in an unparalleled sense, far more so than any of the other animals that we share our planet with—possibly excepting ants, bees, termites, and the like. We have evolved in a way that has made us both spectacularly social and spectacularly successful. Our socialness is actually a main reason for our success, though you wouldn’t know it by looking at the hoopla and claptrap that gets tossed around these days about ‘making it on your own’ and ‘depending on no one’ and ‘going your own way’. We are *social creatures*, we need each other, we help each other, and nothing could be more natural than that. Nor do these very positive traits disappear in our adulthood, it is then that we need each other more than ever—though less so in the sense of pure survival—and the circle of those we need broadens considerably. Our socialness is hardwired into us, it is an inescapable part of our DNA, and we would do well to build societies that both reflect that and encourage it. Given these things then, why do we take so much of ourselves, our identities, from our work? Primarily due to its high social visibility. Our place in the community can very easily be seen by others via the work that we do, the contributions that we make, and the benefit that we potentially offer others. To creatures who are by *default* social to

the extent that we are, these are very important factors. Were we actually as individualized as some would have us believe, what others do wouldn't matter one twit. We'd all grow our own food, make our own clothes, build our own shelters, and entertain ourselves—just like hermit crabs. But wait! Hermit crabs don't build their own shelters—they find and inhabit them. Interdependence strikes again! So although other sources of personal identity, such as familial, political, or religious, do matter and of course contribute to our overall views of ourselves, they are much less socially visible to broader society, and are therefore emphasized less both in others' eyes and in our own. We, again as social creatures, see ourselves by what we can give just as much as by what we can take, by what we offer others just as much as by what they offer us. 'Oh, so you're an artist? Have you done anything I've seen?' 'Yes, yes, I've heard of your company, great work they're doing, I love what they make.' 'Why, I'm a teacher, and yes, I do know your son. He's a charming student.' Our little human world is one of give and take, offering and receiving, exchanging this for that to the benefit of both parties, and our DNA wouldn't have it any other way. It strikes me as perfectly reasonable that our sense of self would extend from the most visible aspect of this *quid pro quo*, and in the modern world that means our occupations.

What then about those in the wrong jobs? In no jobs? How are they to view themselves and how are we to view them? For the purposes of our discussion here we can put both groups into the same category. These are people whose internal, projected sense of self does not match the image that is cast on them by others. They see themselves differently from how others see them, which can be a source of stress and discomfort. To the person who feels that they are in the occupation to which they naturally belong, this is not an issue because their sense of self is so wrapped up in what they do

anyway. A lawyer who has always been interested in the law and the role it plays in society, studies diligently for years on end, takes and passes the exam required by the place she lives to practice as a lawyer, and then devotes a great amount of her day to that practice, will quite naturally have no problem telling people that she is a lawyer and accepting without comment the preconceptions that the hearer then mentally places on her—the preconceptions that she *knows* the hearer has about lawyers generally. She does not mind being pigeonholed in this way because it is something she herself does. The hearer may have a unique negative or positive spin that he places on top of his view of lawyers, but that general underlying impression will be one that is more or less uniform and provided by the context of the society they live in—how people of that area or nation view lawyers *as a rule*, so to speak, though of course the use of ‘rule’ here is somewhat inaccurate. For the person who does not feel that they are in the appropriate line of work, whether via natural ability or inclination, this is not the case. Nor is it the case for those people who are in no work whatsoever. For them there is an active desire to avoid labeling themselves by what they do, to think of themselves in ways that have nothing to do with how they make a living. The alternative primary source of identity in these cases could come from a hobby they are passionate about, an occupation that they want to do but have not been able to, an important ongoing event that they participate in, or a group that they belong to. Take a young man, for instance, who studied architecture all through his schooling, loves designing buildings and does so as frequently as time allows, and feels that he has some natural talent for it, but who nevertheless, due to economic or social realities perhaps, is stuck in an office job doing data input all day. He would by no means consider himself a ‘data inputter’—the very idea would be offensive to him. He is so much more than a mere keyboard jockey, he tells himself, he is an architect *waiting to happen*. Likewise a person who is out of work, whether

chronically or temporarily, would not choose to view themselves as ‘unemployed’—who would take their identity from that? From the absence of doing something? They would likewise view themselves by those things that they enjoy doing or that they are pursuing to do vocationally. Even those people who choose to do nothing and live off of a welfare system of some kind would not look at their reflection in the mirror and say with pride, ‘I’m on the dole, that’s what I do and that’s who I am.’ No, they would say to themselves that they are such and such based on whatever they enjoy doing and however they enjoy spending their time. Or perhaps that they are such and such based on a familial or religious role that they play, or volunteer activity that they do. You see my point I’m sure; they take their identity from somewhere other than their work or lack of work because what they do or don’t do is not how they want to define themselves, nor is it how they want others to define them. And here is where the problem comes in. However deep their desire is to have others view them in a certain way—and again, as hyper-social creatures we are naturally concerned with how others view us to the point that it requires great mental training to overcome this tendency—they will be judged by their occupations or unemployed status. They can tell a person they have just met that they are a poet till they are blue in the face, but that person will categorize them as being a waiter since that is how they make their money. A waiter who enjoys poetry, perhaps, or even a waiter who is also a poet, but that ‘waiter’ label will stick. *And the poor poet knows it!* The poet, who is stuck in the job of a waiter until he gets his big break, knows that others will view him this way, that others will think of him as a waiter and not as a poet; and this mismatch between his personal source of identity and the identity he is assigned by others is a potentially very grievous issue. He doesn’t want to be a waiter, he just is. Likewise, and maybe even more so, those who are unemployed. Who wants to be thought of as a leech on society, sucking away at the taxes others

have to pay? Fair assessment or no, that is how many people view the unemployed, particularly those who are chronically so. As such, these sad people who are in the wrong job, or no job, end up feeling that they are out of place in the community, that they are in an errant public role and are being wrongly judged by their peers. To creatures as social as we are this is a terrible burden to carry. Every single one of us has something that we can do, some contribution that we can make, and some natural ability to that end. Our talents will differ widely, of course, and some may have talents and preferences that others would consider menial or even demeaning; but each of us has a contribution that we can make to others—to our communities and broader societies—and furthermore each of us will have an inclination to do that at which we are naturally abled. The poet loves writing verse and wants an audience for it, a part of the public enjoys reading verse and wants a wide selection of it to choose from—let’s get that poet and others like him writing their poetry and provided with a forum for disseminating it. But some will say that they have one already—it’s called the Internet. Good! Of course that’s the case, but the poor poet still has to wait tables every night to pay his rent. Now that may not be so bad, he may even somewhat enjoy his work as a waiter, *but it’s not how he’d choose to make a living*, and so it’s also not how he’d choose to see himself. And this is the source of the friction he endures, the judgments that are foisted upon him and about which he can do nothing. This is why so many are unhappy in their work, and by extension their lives—for how we see ourselves and how we think others see us is a matter of great importance to us human beings—and there is a solution to it. Since we all have natural abilities and inclinations of one kind or another, each of us can be tested and tracked for what we *can do* and for what we *would do*. And as I’ve been saying they are more often than not the same. Our education systems should therefore endeavor to discover these hidden talents at the youngest age

possible and then channel students into the right fields of training for their talents—it doesn't matter what those talents are or the length of training required. This system should also provide each person with a network of like-minded people, a group they can belong to and from which they can help solidify their sense of themselves and their place in the community. The tracking nature of such a system would naturally provide this as students get to know those they are studying their field with, and of course such groups should also extend beyond the education level and into the professional sphere as well. I would even say that the government should provide each of us with a job, slot each of us into the area to which we are naturally attracted, be it sweeping the streets—for some people do enjoy this kind of work—or performing surgery. Our personal identities and the parts we play in our societies are far too important to leave to chance, as happens now. We let even our best and brightest flounder about and try to find themselves in the madhouse that we call modern life! What a waste of potential this is, what a waste of time considering the years it often takes people to find out who they are. And then in many cases it's already too late for them to do what they would like to. They end up being stuck in jobs that are just okay—or worse, that they hate—but that at least pay the rent and put food on the table. A human being is a beautiful creature and should not be treated with such disregard. No creature should. Some say that we do this in the name of freedom, that it's better to have a choice than to be forced into a career by the government, no matter how unhappy a person may be. Nonsense! Do they really think that we are so inept that we cannot discover the career someone would choose well before they choose it? If someone could do anything that they wanted to, they would choose to do that which they love and are good at, and that is where I say the government should channel them. This is achievable, this is advantageous for all involved, and this is most definitely a far more humane system than the guess-and-check—or

shoot-and-pray—way of doing things that exists now. Again, these are issues that are far too important to just do nothing about.”

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As I recall, we were in an area that was fairly economically depressed when the Teacher gave this talk. There were marks of it everywhere: burned-out factories, abandoned and boarded-up houses, gutted cars littering the sides of the road. It was depressing. The whole scene was one of misery and missed opportunities. I think the Teacher felt very moved by what we all saw around us. I know I did, though I don't know why we were actually there. He may have led us there with the purpose of providing a backdrop for this talk, but I think we probably just ended up in the place and then he was prompted to say what he did. He was a great believer both in seizing the moment and in letting situations unfold naturally, though of course as you can see here he always argued that for the big issues we should take control and make our lives the best that we can.

The Great Teacher also had this deep conviction that government was better equipped to fix broad societal problems than any other organization. I don't think it's that he doubted private initiatives or grassroots movements, I think it's just that he felt that government was a more efficient organizing force than other groups. I have to say that I agree with him. When the government can actually settle its collective mind on doing something it can usually get the thing done, even if a lot of hassle and bureaucracy comes with it. I suppose to the Teacher a lot of the extra bureaucracy itself would be funneled into the overall goal of getting people to do what they like for the benefit of themselves and others, though I personally can't imagine anyone liking a bureaucratic job. Still, remembering that terrible shell of a neighborhood, any meaningful work for the

poor people that lived there would certainly have been better than what they had. Or rather didn't have. Didn't have in bundles.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *community, personal identity, sense of self* | *Leave a comment*

## **On reforms to the education system**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 05/18/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“Education is the key to a well-functioning society. It is the basis upon which a culture establishes itself, refines itself, and ultimately expresses itself. How a society chooses to educate its young not only shapes the future of that society, but also reveals that society’s current values and goals. What does our education systems say about us? That we are confused! That we value freedom of choice far too highly and that we are not adequately concerned with the direction our cultures are headed in. Like in so many other aspects, our overvaluation of egalitarianism and personal choice have created systems that leave our young, our precious young, adrift in a stormy sea of conflicting messages and absence of clear direction. We require them to go to school, of course, and we provide them with at least one local public school, tax supported and free to the student, that they can attend all through their compulsory education

and even a little beyond. This is a good start; it is a decent structure and has its heart in the right place. It is the content of the systems that bothers me, and the administrations upon which they are run. Other than assuring attendance, these systems seem to have few goals beyond producing more consumers. Do not mishear me; this is not to say that individual teachers aren't doing their best. They are, of course, by and large doing all that they can and often going well beyond the call of duty. They are people that care about children and care to make sure that children receive the best possible education that they can given the limitations that they face. Teachers, I think it's safe to make this generality, are aware that they are in charge of shaping young minds and take that responsibility very seriously. The issue does not lie with them, but rather with the direction they're given, the broader goals of the public education systems as enacted by our governments, and the quasi-control that our governments exercise over private educational institutions. These systems exist, but they seem to me to be patched together, hodge-podges of different ideas that went into effect at different times and were then somehow forced to fit, with no clear overall guiding principles. Students are required to have X amount of Y classes, and annual tests are duly given to see where the nation's children's scores are as compared with previous years and with other nations—but just what are we trying to build? Just what kind of culture, what kind of future, are we trying to create through our mandatory education systems? And how can those systems be organized in a more humane, more far-sighted, and more beneficial manner for all involved? If we are going to take the issue seriously then we must start at its very root, at its most basic level, and make some hard choices about what we will require of our children and what we can offer them so that as they become adults they will in turn give back to society and become the next generation of leaders and followers, active members of their communities, decent and loving parents, and fellow citizens

of our interconnected planet. Where then do we start, with such sprawling and convoluted systems already in place? We begin by reforming our goals, by stating clearly what *exactly* it is that we're trying to do when we set out to educate our invaluable young minds, what teachings we want to impart to them and what kind of people we're trying to produce through those teachings. Human beings are extremely malleable, our brains are flexible and plastic, easily shaped and influenced—particularly when we're young. It is therefore of paramount importance that we take the issue of education extremely seriously and realize that what we are actually doing is creating the future of our societies, the future of our planet, the future of our entire race. What should our goals be then? What values do we want to instill and how can we best guarantee a happy and fulfilling future for today's young?

Before stating our goals for education, we must first recognize the realities in which they will be based. Now hear me out on this friends, and do not let the biases we've all been taught creep in before I've finished. First and foremost, human beings are not equal. That's right. We were not created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, as the famous document says. We were not even created at all. Do not put yourselves in God's image! God did not create us to be like him because there is no God to create. Nor was there—God did not die because he was never alive. We must *become* our gods! We must take hold of our societies and shape them, mold them, into something that actually values each human life and recognizes that a part of this valuing is admitting limitations. Stay with me on this; I am not saying that we are not equally important, for each and every one of us is just as worthy as another, each life is precious and should always be loved and honored. No, what I'm saying is that we are not *equally endowed*. We all have different talents and abilities, and some of us are naturally much more gifted than others in one respect or another.

This fact should be recognized and handled appropriately, not ignored for reasons of political correctness as happens now. In addition to being differently abled, we are also differently *inclined*; happily, however, much more often than not people will have a desire to pursue the things at which they are naturally talented, so that abilities and inclinations will often intersect. This allows us to handle each of our students' differences in a more efficient manner, and for those who have a strong desire to pursue a field at which they have no talent whatsoever, compassionate and pragmatic counseling should be given to them. This natural difference among students is the first reality we must face up to. The second, following along from the first, is that for a society to positively progress it should be run by the best elements found within that society. I do not think this is a point that needs to be argued; who would want to be led by a lesser? What kind of culture would desire to be run by its weaker members? I can think of many examples where idiocy and ineptitude have been lauded for their comic purposes, but I cannot think of an example where an idiot has been purposely put into power *because that person was an idiot*. You may want to interject here that more than one idiot has been elected to high office, and I would happily agree with you, though I would also point out that there were other factors involved beyond their idiocy itself that led to their being elected. This issue, by the way, of poor electoral candidates and frankly bad decision making *en masse* in a winner-takes-all dictatorship of the majority—such as our modern 'liberal' democracies are—is of course a major problem with democracy itself. This is one of many reasons that I am opposed to the system generally. But let me stress this: I *am* anti-democratic but I *am not* aristocratic. I do not believe that power should be wielded by a certain class and inherited by that class' children, nor do I believe that the wealthy and successful in any system should have an outsized influence on matters of government, as happens now. The case could be argued

easily and successfully that all of our beloved market-driven democracies are little more than plutocracies run entirely for the benefit of their wealthiest citizens—a far cry from the values espoused by our leaders. But that is perhaps a discussion for another day. What we are interested in here is how these twin realities will shape the system we wish to produce. So we are differently abled and inclined, and we think that we want to be ruled by the best among us—we can agree up to this point, can't we?—if we accept these two statements as being true, as reflecting reality and our desire for good leadership, then what goals for a system of education will flow from them? How will we structure the training we give our young to best benefit them and our societies generally? My brothers and sisters, what are we to do? How are we to think?

The first goal we want to emphasize is that of maximum benefit to the students themselves. We must place them before society *in our minds*, in our theoretical planning—we must think at the individual level in order to build great societies. *For the sake of building great societies*. How can we equip each person to find happiness and fulfillment in their later lives? That question must guide us. The second goal is that of preparing students *for* society. We need to impart to each person that they are part of a greater whole, that they are social creatures who need each other and need to consider each other. The two goals are of course intertwined, and mutually dependent. We cannot have a healthy and progressing society without happy and fulfilled members of that society, and we cannot have happy and fulfilled people living isolated lives without regard for others. Either they will live as parasites preying on their fellows and discover the ultimate unhappiness that fighting their evolutionary instincts in that way brings, or they will recognize that greater benefit can be had for all if people are willing to genuinely work together, to live and grow in an environment of

trust and respect, tolerance and acceptance. Recognizing our differences with humility towards our superiors and nonjudgmental care towards our inferiors—knowing that we ourselves are inferiors too, and knowing also that our superiors see us the same way. In short, loving everyone as a fellow human being and knowing our place in the whole. So we have our two goals: equip students to be able to maximize their individual happiness and fulfillment, and train them to positively contribute to the societies we all want to build. How do we go about this? The key to building an education system based on these two truths and goals—and these are truths; that humans are not equally abled and inclined and that societies are better run by their most skilled members rather than by other members are both statements that can be verified by observation and experience—the key then is to test students at the youngest age possible for their natural abilities and inclinations and then to separate each student into a study program that will prepare them to succeed in their various future fields and at their various future occupations. This initial analysis can easily be done via a battery of psychological tests. Say, for example, that such tests reveal that Michelle Smith has a mind for mathematics and enjoys studying with numbers. She would then be placed, in the following school year, with other like-minded students and begin a curriculum that is mathematics-heavy in nature along with the various other general education courses that the nation wishes to impart to its children. Year after year, she would continue with this specialized program, studying with her peers all along and mixing with those from other specialties only during her general education classes. As the years pass her education would become increasingly specialized, much like happens now during a student's university years, until finally she chooses a specific sub-specialization within her field. Once her studies are completed she will be provided with a job in that specific field—for in this system the state would control all aspects

of employment and everyone would have guaranteed work; this too is part of having a place in the community and knowing it, a crucial aspect of personal identity and contentment with your life. Since our Michelle is something of an intellectual—she is a mathematician, after all—she will have much more schooling than her brother Steve, who excels at sports. His training would be far different, would end earlier, and he too would then be ushered into a career based on the sub-specialty within his field of sports that he chose. Each and every young Billy and Susie would do the same: start with the same kind of general social play schooling that young children undergo the world over, take the psychological tests to determine their abilities and inclinations at the youngest age allowable by the tests, and then begin their main education in an ever increasingly specialized field that allows them ultimately to choose one sub-set of that field which will become the work that they eventually do, the career they will eventually hold. But they have no choice in the matter, some will say! These poor children are forced into fields that they did not elect to study and then forced into a career based on that field. The poor children, oh, the poor children! Balderdash! As I've already said, people tend to *want to do what they can do*—people pursue fields of their natural talents and interests. The difference under our new system compared with current systems is that students are told what they can do long before they are forced to stab around in the dark and follow some inane pattern of guess-and-check like mice stuck in a labyrinth. And what's more, they're trained extensively in their natural talents, making them more effective—and most probably also more efficient—workers in the future. An element of choice also remains; students are allowed to choose their sub-fields and pursue any personal interests that were not discovered by their initial psychological analysis. Should they wish to pursue variant personal interests, those completely outside their field, they can of course do so on their own free time—but they'll make their living

by doing what they're good at and what they've been trained to do. You can see the advantages here, I'm sure. Not only will everyone have their place in their community guaranteed—their occupation and the sense of personal identity that goes along with it—they will also know where they belong in their greater society as well. By extensively training students to do well what they want to do and what they're good at anyway, we are simultaneously equipping them to maximize their potential—and hence sense of fulfillment and resulting happiness—and to positively contribute to the culture they all share. And we're doing all this completely without the guesswork that's needlessly involved now. How many poor young men and women waste years of their lives trying to discover what it is that they want to do? How many squander valuable hours of their time pursuing fields that have been glamorized by the consumer cultures we are all currently victims of only to find much later that they have absolutely no talent for it? Why are we allowing our children and young adults, even older adults, to waste their lives in this way? Because of our ridiculous emphasis on 'freedom' and 'choice'! We would be much better off without such nonsense! And so would our societies, regardless of the nations and cultures involved. These are *human issues* and as such concern all of human society. Our mammalian brothers and sisters do not specialize themselves in the way that we do, much less the insects, amphibians, reptiles, so on and so forth. No, these are uniquely, for the moment at least, human problems, but they are broadly *human problems* and are not limited to our sad little democracies or even our neighbors' theocracies, dictatorships, monarchies, et cetera. So let's approach them as such, beginning with our own area and seeing where others go from there; for there is nothing less at stake than the future itself. And every one of us deserves to have the brightest and best future possible."

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This really hit home for me. Just before I started following the Great Teacher around I had quit yet another job that was killing me with boredom and was feeling a bit lost. It's my own fault that I ended up in such a mess, really. Although, in thinking about it now, I guess that the Teacher would tell me that it wasn't my own fault. He would say that I was simply one of a great many misplaced people who the system had let down with its cold emphasis on choice. In other words, not giving a hoot about anyone. Well, be that as it may, after hearing this the first time and then again just now as I was typing it out to post here, I really think he's onto something. I ended up majoring in business administration at university. Not because I had any particular interest in it, but simply because I didn't know what I wanted to do and my father told me I couldn't go wrong with something having to do with business. It wasn't until much later in my adult years that I found my passion for design, but of course by then I was already stuck in a career trajectory that had nothing to do with it. I could have gone back to school, I guess, and started over from scratch. But if you're the person doing the hiring and you've got two applications on your desk, one from a young kid fresh out of school and full of ideas, and the other from an old fart who just went back to school in his forties, who do you think you'd call for an interview? Exactly. So I felt stuck and I still do, working at office jobs and bouncing from one place to the next until I find something that's at least tolerable. What a waste, just like the Teacher said.

Speaking of, just after he got done delivering this lecture to us, I remember that he paused a while, took a deep breath and glanced over all of us lost souls, wanderers, and drop-outs sitting there on the grass in front of him in a park somewhere. He looked right at me, smiled, and added that of course if we wanted to quit our jobs under this new system we could, and would then be transferred to a

similar post in a new location. I guess he really did know people well, and he really did want everyone to have the best situation they could.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *education reforms, education system, training* | *2 comments*

Lucyssky says:

Posted 05/18/2011 at 9:20pm

Interesting, and some good points about how important our careers are to our happiness and sense of belonging. I wonder, what psychological tests, specifically, did he have in mind?

Freedom99 says:

Posted 05/19/2011 at 7:42am

No way do I want the government to tell me what to do. This is one of the worst ideas I've heard in a long time. I'd rather work at some fast food place for minimum wage with a doctorate in physics than be told what to study and then even worse be given a job I have to do. Choice is the only thing that matters, and the choice to fail and be miserable is just as important as any other choice. It's a basic part of being free.

## **On the emerging global culture, its potential, and the ethics it requires**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 05/25/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“The sun is shining brightly, fluffy clouds are streaming across the clear blue sky, and there’s a scent of spring in the air. But where have you all gone? You’re inside, stuck in front of your monitors with pasty eyes stretched wide open. And what is it that’s got your attention so? The World Wide Web, the Internet, the great global matrix that has connected us all in ways we could not imagine and completely changed far more aspects of how we live our lives than anyone could have predicted. And this is a very positive development! Like all things, it can be overdone, and I would counsel you to get outdoors more, but in general the Internet has brought to humanity what it has long, long, needed. A true center for freedom of expression, an actual place where *everyone* can

have their say—and we must tirelessly protect the sanctity of this, we must always be able to post in a censor-free environment—and at the same time interact with people from all corners of the planet, read what they have to say and even reply to them. This is happening now, has been happening for years already, and will continue to happen despite the best efforts of a minority of the powerful who wish to see the Internet hampered. And what has all of this largely unfettered global communication brought to us? An ever-growing *global culture*; our age is witnessing on a world-wide scale what the ancient citizens of the Mediterranean saw, what the people of the Three Kingdoms experienced, a true expansion of a dominant cultural form over vast areas of land, a cultural form that unites all of the people within its reach linguistically, economically, and of course socially. But politically? That remains in question, although the Internet is a powerful tool for organization and we have already seen it used in movements of people to topple their governments—and I suspect that this role it offers will continue to grow—but to what extent it actually *unites* its users in the political sense is still something quite vague as its resources have not been directly applied to the political process, merely to the organization of those who wish to be politically involved. Were it applied in a system of direct democracy or the like, I think it would eventually fail under its own weight due to the problems inherent in direct democracy, and indeed with democracy generally. And its application to a representative democracy is a moot point, for such systems are *not* ‘of the people, by the people, and for the people’ despite what’s been drilled into our heads, nor was the three-fold cry of the French Revolution for liberty, equality, and fraternity ever realized in France or anywhere else; these are points I’ve already made to you, and those of you still hounding after me and pestering me daily with your endless questions are well acquainted with my thoughts on the issue. No, what the Internet has given us instead is

probably something of much more value to the average person since our political systems are mere tools of the wealthy anyway, best changed as soon as possible but for now let's just ignore them, I want instead to explore what this global culture may mean. Working in tandem with the rise of English as the *lingua franca* of the modern age, the Internet has grown quite organically into all sorts of avenues. We have forums, we have discussions, we have art sites, photography, films, lectures, blogs, dictionaries and encyclopedias, social networking sites, up to the moment updates, sports, news, shopping—oh, how we have shopping—the list goes on and on. Anything you want to know, learn more about, check out, glance over, see for yourself, read up on, or simply zone out to can be done on the Internet. It is replacing our radios, TVs, and movie theaters simultaneously. It is entering all aspects of our lives as it becomes increasingly portable; today's handheld smartphones will be tomorrow's chip implanted in your skull. Instant Internet access without even having to use your hands! Just think about what site you'd like to view and there it is in your mind—would you even need to use your eyes, or could the content be absorbed directly into your neural network? Time will tell on that issue, but the fact remains that the Internet has now grown to include all of us in this great global culture, this great global awareness. And what does this mean? This gives all of us a touching-off point; we can communicate with each other in ways that surpass everything that's been possible so far due to the commonalities we now all share. Languages and cultures still differ by nation, of course, but nearly everyone online can communicate to at least some extent in English thanks to concerted efforts in education systems the world over, and where cultures—and by extension ways of thinking, ways of approaching the external world—vary we can nevertheless approach each other from the same starting point. 'Did you see that on such and such.com?' 'Watch the footage of this and that, it's amazing!' 'I saw that in blank country blank leader quit his post.'

‘Yes, I saw that, too.’ Regardless of the language or place such content was originally viewed, read, or experienced, the content itself was the same, and this gives us all an additional connection. The Internet is vast, and the information it carries far more so, but when it comes to *what is happening now* we all tend to see more or less the same things at more or less the same time. It’s almost unavoidable, even if you don’t care one iota about the news it’s right there when you log in to your email account or even start up your browser and see your default homepage. You actually have to make a large effort to shield yourself from this barrage of ‘breaking news’. This has many meanings, and perhaps I’ll go over some of the other points later, but today let’s focus on the uniting factor that this gives us. As I said, we are all increasingly part of a global mindedness, an awareness of events the world over, the reactions to them, entertainments that have gone viral, and a host of other tidbits and miscellanea that we happen to notice online. Regardless of where we are, or even who we are, we are all becoming increasingly interconnected in this way. As this process continues, a true global culture will emerge, to an extent that will probably surprise most of us. We will indeed have more in common with each other *the world over* than was even attained in the Roman Empire and its vast and well-documented spread of language, ethics, politics, sports, religion, entertainment, technology, food, drink, art—all aspects of life, really. So where is this taking us and how should we react to this phenomenon?

Unfortunately, but not at all surprisingly, the current direction our global culture seems to be heading is towards one of crass consumerism. Spend, spend, spend! Click here to buy this, link to this site where you can continue shopping, and then pay for it all via this system using an electronic funds transfer. Some of this is necessary, of course; under our current system all goods need to be paid for, and even those who would give their works away free

often need to at least charge for their production—unless the goods in question are purely electronic and simply need to be displayed—but do we really need to have half of the content on our websites as ad banners? Do we *need* that? Is this way of doing things necessary? Yes, in fact it is, as long as we keep our economic order of mind-numbing and drug-like dependence on consumerism supported by our so-called ‘representative democracies’ and their kowtowing to the rich and powerful at the expense of ninety-nine percent of the planet. But don’t blame the people we—well, you, actually, since I don’t vote—put in office, they’re just trying to make the most of the opportunities they have to provide the best possible lives for themselves and their families—just like you would do given a reversal of your situations. The problem is *the system itself*. We have allowed our cultures to become nothing more than marketplaces, and we have surrendered our sense of value as *human beings* to one of a monetary amount. How much you earn now equals how valuable you are as a person. Disgusting! Ridiculous! I cannot say enough how wrong this is, how dehumanizing it is, how repressive and demeaning it is. We are all of far greater worth than any amount of money can indicate, and our lives can be so much more fulfilling than that which comes from endlessly chasing after more and more profit. You and I and everyone we know are much, much more than cogs in the great buy-and-junk machine, regardless of our finances and what we do with them. But as I said, this is a natural consequence of the systems we live under and no one individual can be entirely blamed for it. So where do we start? How can this emerging global culture be put to work for our benefit and not simply as a means of further belittling us in the effort to squeeze out more filthy lucre? First of all, we need to start local. We need to use the Internet and the connectivity it grants to organize ourselves in the areas we live in. I mentioned earlier how we have seen popular uprisings organized via the Internet that have then gone on to topple

governments. These have been amazing and wonderful feats, and let's all hope that the governments they replace the old ones with aren't cynical profit-machines like you and I suffer under. An extension of this is the need for self-rule, and here again the organizational tools granted by the Internet can be put to good use. There are still people living under the domination of foreigners in their land, and this must be rectified. I do not condone violence towards these ends, or indeed towards *any* ends, but human history has long shown that people prefer even bad home rule over that of foreigners, regardless of the benefits the latter may bring. This is likely due to our strong tendencies for group association and in-group/out-group thinking. In the absence of a world government that is based on international law and that is intended to benefit all of the world's citizens and not simply its wealthy, every people deserves its own government and the Internet can be a powerful tool in achieving this. International support for such movements can be garnered via the Internet as well, of course, and this is another potentially very positive aspect of our growing global culture—average people the world over helping other average people achieve their ends, flying in the face of the desires of the powerful and wealthy if need be.

Given the elements I've just described: our emerging, and growing, global culture and the potential it holds for connecting all of us in fairer and far more humane ways—and towards these ends—how are we to approach our future? What ethics do we need to equip ourselves and our children with in order to best benefit from the potential a global culture grants us? The most crucial issue is that of a true *global consciousness* that extends beyond the level of awareness we've already reached. This issue strikes too at the heart of our associative group thinking. I just mentioned how important it is for those without it to have self-rule, but why is that the case? Largely because we are all still tribal, despite modern tribes now

consisting of vast numbers of people living together in a single nation. This is complicated somewhat in the case of multi-ethnic nations where people of minority groups tend to view themselves as being a member of their country of origin first and adopted country second, but the important point here is exactly that—they view themselves by their countries, by their backgrounds, by the group they feel that they belong to. This is what we need to overcome if we are to grow as a species, and the advent of a global culture allows us to do just that if we approach it properly. And this approach must be to broaden our thinking to make it global. We can ill afford to continue to view ourselves in backwards and short-sighted ways such as those espoused by patriotism. Have we learned nothing from the great wars of our past? Why do we insist on focusing on these artificial differences instead of our common humanity? For the differences are indeed artificial, there is nothing genetically in us that makes us speak the languages we do, dress in the clothes we wear, enjoy certain foods, or any other aspects of the cultures we've been raised in. Those, and all aspects of culture, were imprinted on us in our childhood; they are learned behaviors, learned thinking processes, and can be unlearned, adjusted, and replaced. And this is what we *must* do. We must learn to view ourselves with a global consciousness that is deeper and broader than our burgeoning global awareness. We know what is happening in the world around us, far more so and far more quickly than any previous generation, but we still view those events as being 'over there', done by 'them', while 'we' are 'here' and 'our events' carry more importance and meaning. This is understandable given our history and predisposition to form small bands that cooperate for survival, and also because things like storms or natural disasters are of course localized and their influence limited, but this way of approaching our world is hampering us from the real potential a global culture affords. This is what I mean by a global consciousness: viewing ourselves as

human beings and not as members of X country or Y ethnic group. We are all products of the planet, we have evolved from common ancestors and our differences are artificial and enforced by custom alone—they are not biological. Some cultures have allowed for certain groups to enjoy more success than other groups, but that does not change the fact that we are all *biologically equal*, not in our abilities or talents, but in our humanness. This further means that we are all equally valuable, and the first step to realizing this, to really incorporating it into our thinking, is to overcome our petty nationalism and look at ourselves as citizens of the planet. A single world government would be extremely helpful in achieving this, but that sadly still appears to be quite a ways off, and so it is up to us to challenge ourselves and change our own thinking. As the Internet and recent economic crises have abundantly shown, our world is connected with strands of iron; the consequences of events in places on the other side of the planet ripple across this web to touch lives everywhere. We are in fact already united, we are in fact one people walking this earth, and we now only need to acknowledge that and really take it to heart. Again, we are here as products of the planet, we live and grow from its abundance, and we are all in this position together; we must view this relationship properly and we must educate our children to do so as well. We need to give them the advantages that we never had, raise them to think of themselves first and foremost as human beings, and stop hampering them with petty nationalistic prejudices that lead only to conflict and the mismanagement and hoarding of limited resources. My vision is of a world united that is organized to allow each living thing to enjoy happiness and fulfillment, and I would give that vision to you as well. Which is why I believe this ethics of humanity—of humanism, of putting people *as people* first and not as representatives of some arbitrarily delineated geographical region—must be taught in our schools from the very first day. We moderns are still too petty, too set in the ways instilled in us, to

leave an issue as vital as this in the hands of individual parents. Children must be taught to respect, tolerate, understand, accept, and love every person that shares the planet with them as being equally valuable and worthy of those feelings as themselves. Of course we will need the support of mothers and fathers in bequeathing these great values, but in order to guarantee that each and every little one has the benefit of this teaching this ethics needs to be a part of the mandatory education we all receive. It is far too important an issue to leave to chance.”

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It’s funny, until I started following the Great Teacher and my days became filled with hours of walking instead of hours sitting in an office, I never noticed just how big a part of my life the Internet was. But having it pointed out to me like it is here, I find that the Teacher’s summary is exactly right. We are all developing a new and global culture every time we go online, whether we actually post anything or not. And I think the crux of what that means is that we are all in this together, and it’s high time we started acting like it instead of like a bunch of children fighting over the best toys. I don’t think the Teacher’s insistence on the need to make this part of our schooling will go down very well. I can hear a lot of angry people shouting, “Don’t tell me what to teach my kids!” or, “No one can teach my kids but me!”, but I also think he’s right on that point as well. I mean, look at all the crazy maniacs out there who behave like idiots, ruin everyone’s day that gets in their path, and then insist that their behavior is “their choice”. Whole nations often behave this way, especially in their foreign policy. He’s right, the Voice in the Wilderness or the Burning Bush or whatever you want to call him, but I’m not sure if many people are ready to see things the way the Teacher did. I hope so though.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *ethics, global consciousness, global culture* | *3 comments*

BobReynolds says:

Posted 05/26/2011 at 7:10am

Well sir, I'm one of those people saying don't tell me what to do or teach my own damn kids. If I want to ruin them it's my choice, and if they want to do differently it's theirs.

Freedom99 says:

Posted 05/26/2011 at 8:42pm

Me too, Bob. Have you checked out libertarianism? I think you'd really like what it has to say, and many areas have a local party you could join, too.

To me this issue is about superiority. We can't guarantee our future wealth unless we're willing to defend it from others. And as much as you may want to believe otherwise, different nations are out for their own benefit and if we're aren't also then we'll end up losing. We have to fight for everything we have and be willing to do terrible things to keep it all. That's the way of the world sure, but the question is how to apply it on a national political level, and like I said libertarianism is the best answer there.

SusieCue says:

Posted 05/28/2011 at 11:16am

You two make me wanna cry. We're all brothers and sisters and lovers, and we've got to get together! Our souls are one and all we need is love. You really should listen to the Teacher on this one, he's right again.

## **On sex and sexuality**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 06/01/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“I should probably give you some teachings on sex and sexuality in general, considering how important it is to us as biological creatures and how large a part it plays in our lives and our dealings with others. Not to mention the oversized role it has been given in our consumerist ‘culture’—that is to say, the relentless barrage of advertising we all face. But to be honest, I’m now a very old man, or at least feel that way, and can barely remember how the whole process works so you’ll have to be patient with me as I meander through the subject, and forgive me if I ramble a bit.

The most important point here, I think, is one that I touch on often: mutual respect. It hardly needs to be said that this should of course be the foundation upon which all relationships are based—and really this should be the angle from which we approach every other

living creature on our grand planet—but unfortunately we’ve all been so belittled, alienated, and stupefied by the popular culture that surrounds us and the relentless drive for profit that it’s based on that it does need to be said. So before we get to penises, vaginas, mouths and anuses let’s spend a moment on this very important point. The mindset we hold has an enormous impact on how our interactions with others take shape. If we approach someone, or even a non-human animal, with thoughts that do not stem from a base of mutual respect we are creating conflict where none might exist right from the start. To think to ourselves thoughts that degrade or insult another person or creature before we’ve even interacted with them will accomplish nothing but to set up walls between ourselves and them and put our minds into an antagonistic mode which is almost certainly completely unnecessary. Let me give you an example. Let’s say that you go into a store somewhere and the young woman behind the register is dressed in a way that displeases you. You don’t mean to judge her, you don’t purposely think to yourself that the way she’s dressed makes her look like whatever you think she looks like, but the thoughts nevertheless arise in your mind and more than likely are then displayed on your face in some manner. Now when you’ve chosen your item and gone to pay for it, she picks up on your unintentionally judgmental attitude and her mind switches to one of defense and even possibly counter-aggressiveness. She can sense that you’re judging her, and she naturally takes that poorly. We all want to be accepted and even liked, loved, for who we are, regardless of who we are. So now she feels that you don’t accept her, and by extension don’t like her, and she becomes defensive. Or perhaps the way she prefers to dress often causes conflict with members of another generation that was raised to view clothing and fashion in a dissimilar manner to the way she does. Now she is so used to being judged that she is almost always on the defensive and any excess judgment sends her into attack mode—*she becomes aggressive*

*with you* just from the look on your face when you head to the register to buy that frilly keychain accessory that you just can't live without and that will make your life so much more complete and meaningful. What just happened? A series of subconscious reactions based on prejudices that stemmed from a mindset that was not set to a default of mutual respect, but was instead allowed to run on its own, unchecked and ungoverned. We are all raised differently, and taught to see the world in slightly different ways, to affix the labels of 'good' and 'bad' to different things, and upon reaching adulthood we either keep the system we were raised under or alter it in minor or major ways—but we still affix those labels and we still have thoughts that tell ourselves the way things *ought to be* rather than just seeing things as *the way they are*. This is the root of a great deal of conflict and unhappiness, and in the case in point—the mindset we hold when we approach others—it can, and often does, lead to unnecessary conflict such as the scene just described. How can this be avoided? Quite simply really, all we need to do is to keep a watchful eye on our minds—be aware, be *mindful*. When you notice thoughts arising that are based in judgmentalism, simply dismiss them. Do not allow them to form in your subconscious, and instead actively put your mindset into one that is accepting of all, tolerant of differences, and begins with a feeling of mutual respect. It may not be genuine at first, you may have to work at it, but if you truly accept that every person and creature has a value of its own, and is worthy of being alive, then this should not be too difficult a thing for you to do. I'm not saying that this will make you best friends with the woman behind the counter at that keychain accessory store, but it will make for a far more pleasant interaction with her, however brief that interaction may be. And I think that you'll find that if you put your mind into a more positive framework this way your interactions with others will be much more pleasant generally. Again, it all begins with this basis of mutual respect; and if at first you feel that the respect in

question is not mutual, that you are respecting them but they are not respecting you, then simply let that go. Your respect for them will show in the same way that your judgmentalism will, and will win their respect for you.

Now on to penises, vaginas, mouths and anuses. I want to make it immediately clear here that I have absolutely no issues with the kinds of sexual acts people engage in, as long as they are consensual. I find it hard to believe that there are still people who condemn others based on something as harmless, and completely natural, as homosexuality. But then, I also find it hard to believe that there are still people who earnestly think, and sometimes speak, their wishes for this and that in a non-stop manner hoping that the potent magic man or woman of their choice will hear their cries, snap those magic fingers, and whammo! produce the desired outcome or—in yet another sad commentary on just how far consumerism has embedded itself into our minds—product. ‘Oh God, if you could just give me that car I’ve been obsessing over...’ Very sad, indeed, and extraordinarily counterproductive and unhealthy. But that is neither here nor there, my point is this: Leave the gays and bisexuals alone, they’re regular people just like everyone else and deserve to be loved, accepted, understood, and respected—just like everyone else. To paraphrase a great man who once summed it up beautifully: everybody be nice to each other. You may be wondering about so-called deviant sexual acts, such as those involving sadomasochism, bodily waste disposal, or other things that most don’t go for. Again, to me, as long as they are consensual, then I think the choice should be left entirely up to those involved. Personally, I think that acts that are intended to cause shame promote a very unhealthy mindset and will cause great unhappiness for those who participate in them, whether at the time or later on, but nevertheless I do not think it’s my place to say that they shouldn’t engage in those acts if both parties really do

want to. The litmus test is, as always, mutual respect. Likely the party that is stimulated by causing shame does not have respect for their partner, and in that case I would counsel them to stop doing what they're doing, but in issues like these it really is a matter of a case-by-case basis, and I am loathe to violate the sanctity of people's bedrooms. You're all looking at me a bit askance, so let me remind you that I prefaced this little talk here today with the warning that I may ramble somewhat.

Okay, let me get to it. Start with respect for everyone; do not use people as masturbatory tools. Casual sex is fine if both parties want it, but duping someone into sex just for your own benefit is an extremely degrading act, and the degradation goes both ways. If you're in a committed relationship, actually be committed to it. Infidelity causes enormous pain in the hurt party, and no one who truly respects their partner would wish to put them through that kind of pain. This commitment includes, of course, all of the non-sexual support that partners require; if you're in a stable and long-term relationship then you ought to work at being there for your partner and meeting their needs. Again, all of this will come naturally from a mindset of mutual respect such that both partners, if both are willing to work at their relationship, should be able to find fulfillment there. If you're not in a committed relationship but are in a relationship, then allow things to develop naturally and do not intentionally mislead your partner for selfish advantage—that also causes great pain. That piece of advice is more for the men in the crowd, but of course some women need to hear it too. Basically, always be honest, be good to each other, and remember that your partner is probably seeing your relationship differently than you are so it's a good idea to talk things over now and then. And if you're not in a relationship at all, don't worry about it. Learn to accept singleness as you should accept all things in your life that are currently beyond your control—with graciousness. Be at peace

with the moment every moment, and extend this to all areas of your life. That really is for everyone and not just for the single people; accept *now* as it *is*, try to live with your mind in the present just as it is and not as you would like it to be. And finally, for those people who are ‘gender-confused’—what a prejudiced label that is! ‘birth gender-differentiated’ would be much better—I support them. Feeling that you should have been born as another gender than you were must be extremely painful, extremely grieving. These poor people need everyone’s support and respect, and they should be able to have gender-altering surgery and therapy free of charge, completely covered by the national health system. They should not be judged any more than anyone else should be judged; they should be loved and accepted and allowed to live the lives that they feel to be in line with who they are. Really, let’s everyone just be nice to each other, and put ourselves in other’s shoes frequently for a bit of perspective. There is nothing disgusting about a human being or any other living creature. Approach all with a mindset of mutual respect, and keep that mindset in all matters related to sex and sexuality.”

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This is one of my wife’s favorites. I actually emailed it to her while we were still on the road to get her off my back about the “hippie bandwagon” (her words) I had joined. I don’t really have much to add here, and can’t think of any kind of analysis or commentary that I could give. The Teacher basically just says to treat everyone well, especially in matters related to sex. Makes a lot of sense to me, particularly when I think about all the stupid things I did when I was younger just to get someone’s pants off. And of course with sexual minorities his point is the same as always: love and respect everyone, regardless of your differences. Like I said, makes a lot of sense to me.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *mutual respect, sex, sexuality* | 3 comments

SusieCue says:

Posted 06/02/2011 at 12:05am

Sexual freedom was a hard-won battle. Long may it live! Right on again, Teach!

Lucyssky says:

Posted 06/02/2011 at 4:57pm

From a legal standpoint, I really can't think of a reason why sexual minorities should be denied rights that those in the majority have. If we extend this thinking out, it's easy to see how they should enjoy the same social acceptance as well.

Captainjack says:

Posted 06/03/2011 at 10:20pm

oh man i thought this was gonna be a dirty one bumper!

## **On living in the present**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 06/08/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“We’ve been walking for hours, but where are we going? Where did we come from? Where have we arrived at? I’ll tell you where—here. We’re *here now*, and that’s all I can give you. Every morning I wake up and try to be as quiet as possible. I creep out of my tent like a mouse, sneak off to urinate, tiptoe back and ever so silently take down my tent and fill up my backpack. Then I take out my breakfast and chew it with care, barely making a noise and shuddering with every crunch. Was that too loud? Who else could have heard that? I don’t want to wake you, you see, my hope is to get all of these little things done and be on the road long before any of you have awoken. And why is that? Why do I go to such efforts to leave you in the lurch every morning? It’s because I’m afraid you all expect me to know where I’m going, when all I know is *where I am*. I’m afraid that you think I’m leading you to some

grand place, to some utopia of the mind where nothing bad ever happens and you can live forever in a blissed out trance. The fact of the matter is I have no idea where I'm going when we head out on our little daily hikes. I simply start walking, and wherever we end up when it starts to get dark I either lead us to a hotel, motel, or failing that, a place where we can camp. And based on how often we actually do camp, you really should have learned by now what a terrible guide I am. I have no sense of direction, you must know that, and no clear purpose either. My wisdom was born of the road, and as long as my feet can carry me they will—but you are all much more connected to this life than I am! You, my brothers and sisters, you have families, you have homes, you have favorite places and beautiful ties to your communities, you even have careers—well, careers that are on hold, careers that you will one day go back to—and these will guide your lives and give you a great measure of satisfaction and feeling of accomplishment. But me? This cawing old magpie? All I have is the ground beneath my feet—and that's not even mine! This gear that I haul around everyday was given to me, this walking stick I picked up in a forest somewhere, and these clothes, I can't even remember where they came from. When I die the world will have scarcely taken notice of me; I am a cloud that will have blown across the sky of this fair planet and emptied itself out with one too many rainstorms, its dust particles no longer even able to hold themselves together. Will anyone remember me? Should anyone remember me? Should anyone remember anything at all? It matters very little; in fact, it does not matter at all. And until the day finally arrives when I am able to scurry off into the distance and you find yourselves suddenly in charge of making your own decisions again, that is what I would have you learn. We hold so tightly to these ideas of ourselves, these images of who we are that we've conjured up; we obsess about our pasts and fret over our futures as if they were some real quantities that we could do anything about. I tell you that

the past is gone, it is unchangeable and irreplaceable—forget it! Toss it into the river of time and let the current take it where it already is: far, far away. Dwelling on the past, especially wrongs we think we've been inflicted with, will do nothing to put things right. And daydreaming about past good times will likewise do nothing to bring them back. The past is dead, and we all know what that means—it is gone. There is no afterlife for our consciousnesses, of course there's no afterlife for past events. They remain only as long-term memories stored in our brains, little masses of neural tissue that are fueled by the continued functioning of our bodies, leftovers from the lives we've lived. And when our lives are extinguished, those memories of our pasts will go too. This is not a cause for despair! Rather, it is a reason for great joy because it makes the present moment all the more valuable. This time now is really all that any of us have, and to live in that, to keep our minds in this moment now, is the surest way to achieve happiness and tranquility. You know that I am not the first to say this, it is a *very* old teaching, but one that nevertheless bears repeating and repeating and repeating, for a simple glance around you at this moment now will tell you what a terrible jungle of suffering and strife our world is. It is heart-breaking how people chase after this and that, their minds always bent on *getting*, on *winning*, on *amassing and achieving*. And then poof! It's all over and where did all of that effort get any of them? Their graves aren't even deeper in the ground than yours or mine! You have come a long way with me and you know this to be so, even those whose names remain with us for reasons great or terrible will too someday disappear. Take a long view of history and know this; can any of you remember the name of the first chieftain to lead his or her small band of *homo sapiens* out of Africa? Of course not, but at the time he or she was a great hero, opening the door to the entire planet for our race and showing us that we could live *everywhere*. So drop the past, be free of it. When a memory arises enjoy it

briefly if it's a pleasant one, but do not let it take you out of the present, do not get lost in it. Talk about loved ones who have passed away, treasure their lives, but remember that they are gone and you are here now. And as for those wrongs you've endured? Those troubles you've had? Do not even let them arise in your minds, they are just as gone as any other past event and to dwell on them will only bring you unhappiness. *Be free* of the past by being in the present.

What about the other way? What about looking forwards? As you've no doubt guessed, my teaching is the same—let it go. The future isn't as palpable as the past, it is more so. With the past at least our minds have created a record of actual events or information and stored them as memories, but with the future our minds are reaching out into an unknown, an *unknowable*, and projecting their hopes and desires. I believe I've already discussed with you how our capacity for planning has been a tremendous boon to us as a species—it allowed us to overcome chronic problems like how to best handle resource management and deal with unpredictable changes in the weather. Also of course in relation to how we bested competing bands of other animals, and then later other human-animal groups. Planning has its place and is clearly very valuable, but it took on such importance in our evolutionary development that our minds have now become wired to plan *by default*. Like it or not, mean to or not, our minds if left ungoverned will drift into daydreams about the past or the future, and both tendencies are related to this drive to plan. In the case of the former, our brains may be looking for clues to currently perceived stimuli—have I encountered something like this before? What happened then? Is this dangerous? Beneficial? Some trigger may have started our minds down this path and then away we go into yesteryear. Of course there are times when our minds just drift into memories for no apparent reason at all, and these cases, I think,

are side effects of the default tendency to plan—to be out of the present. In the case of the latter, our minds drifting into the future, our brains are dealing with such pertinent issues as how to best succeed given current conditions, how to react in such a way as to maximize the potential before us. This is really where we have shone as a species, and this adaptive skill has allowed each of us to be far more successful in uncertain environments than any other animal could hope to be. We don't search for shelter when it starts to rain; we build homes to provide us with shelter rain or shine. We don't quit storing food when we've got enough for the day; we get excess and keep it for as long as we can. We don't walk for hours along a riverbank searching for a place where we can cross; we build a tool to transverse the area where we already are. The examples are endless and all point to being biologically advantageous, so why then am I recommending that we release our obsession with the future the same way I say we should for the past? Because it is unknowable, because it is unreachable, because it is unalterable, and therefore to strive after it is a source of grief that I would have us spare ourselves. No matter how well we lay our plans we cannot, and never will be able to, predict every eventuality or control every variable. We simply do not know how tomorrow will turn out, nor *can* we know. We can have a pretty good idea based on available evidence, but obviously every little eventuality is beyond us. To create expectations for ourselves, therefore, is only to set ourselves up for a fall. 'Oh, I'm going to study this and live there and then I'll get a job at this place and make that much money and then...' And what happens if our little chain of events doesn't turn out just the way we thought it would? Disappointment. Depression even. Suffering that was easily avoidable. Tomorrow will turn out as tomorrow will turn out, no matter how much mental energy we spend today on wishing it one way or the other. And so I say to let it go, along with many sages who have come before me. Set goals for yourself, of course, have

things that you want to achieve and a basic plan for achieving them, but do not obsess over them. Instead hold those plans very lightly, allow them to be flexible and always be ready to change them or even drop them completely if need be. Keep your mind on where you are now because the world can only be as it is, *but can always get better*. We shape our societies through our daily individual interactions, so keep yourself in those interactions and the very important people that are part of them. Value every single living creature around you, and be with them *here and now*, not just physically but mentally as well. If we allow our minds to be in fairytale land while a co-worker is conveying important information we are doing a disservice to them and to ourselves. Even if our co-worker is telling us about some dream they had that has nothing to do with anything, we're still doing them wrong by not being there for them as a listener. If they feel that what they're saying is worth saying at all, it certainly deserves an attentive pair of ears. So keep your mind in the present, because it is truly all any of us have and hence is a beautiful treasure.

But what are any of us? Now that is a question. I've shown you why we should focus on the present in favor of allowing ourselves to wallow in the past or daydream about the future, but just what are we *here and now*? Are we the same as we were? Will we be as we are? Is there some constant within us that travels through time in this way? I'll tell you right now that this image we have of ourselves as distinct and somewhat permanent entities traveling about the planet separated from everything else is flatly wrong. We are not distinct, we are not permanent, and we certainly aren't separate from the planet that birthed us. *We are an extension of it*. This is difficult to see because we're very mobile, but let me expound on this for a while. Right now, as you sit there in the grass on the side of this small country road with that lovely river in the distance, you are taking in all this nice scenery as you listen to me

ramble. But it is also taking you in. That's right, the scenery is absorbing your presence in a similar fashion to the way you are absorbing it. The river does not have eyes, the grass does not have ears, but nevertheless both of them, and the road and everything else as well, are aware of us in a way that is not conscious like our awareness is but is there nevertheless. They register us, so to speak. And how is this? Through the common structure that all matter shares. Right now we are being bombarded by billions of neutrinos as they pass through our bodies in their endless straight lines across the universe. Can we feel them? No, of course not, but they're there all the same. They're one type of sub-atomic particle, the building blocks that make up all matter everywhere across the universe. We have been taught to think of ourselves as special and glorious snowflakes that are truly unique and endowed from on high as something altogether different from the natural world. Nothing could be further from the truth. The same elements, the same basic constituents that compose the stars, asteroids, gassy and rocky planets—and even exotica like quasars and dark matter—make up our bodies. The combinations occur differently, of course, and in different amounts, but literally every bit of matter in the entire universe is made of the same materials. So what does this mean? First of all, what I'm always telling you: We are products of the planet and not something apart and above it. We are the natural result of a long process of change and adaptation. We are not more valuable than anything else around us—we are *equally valuable*. Every creature and object is just as much a product of evolution as we are and should be recognized and cherished as such. Yes, I put us all in the same category as rocks. Is that offensive? Why should it be? It is meant to give us the proper perspective on things. And now listen to this: We are not even us! Every cell in our bodies is in a state of constant flux, dividing, growing, dying, creating—unending change. What part of us is permanent even for the temporary time we're alive? How can we even speak of

*permanence* knowing full well that we were born a certain number of years ago and will die a certain number of years hence? And every second in between those two events about which we make such a fuss consists of nothing but *change!* Extrapolating from this, as I've just demonstrated, every bit of matter in our grand universe is linked via the common structure that *we* all share—I'm linking all animate and inanimate things together here as *we*—and this structure is one that is marked by being in a state of constant change, growth, death, and rebirth in a cycle that repeats itself innumerable times until finally the elements of the universe drift so far apart from each other that they are no longer held together in chunks of matter and all dissolves back into its energy form. In everyday terms this means that really there is no elemental difference between not only you and the friend sitting next to you, but also you and the blades of grass that you're sitting on. Oh, I know that you think there is a world of difference between you and the grass, and a universe of difference between you and that smelly loudmouth you're next to, but on the most basic level, and therefore the most *fundamental* level, that is not the case. The differences we imagine are only there because of the labels we have affixed to everything. We call that 'grass' and this 'Bob' and that over there 'Susan' and that other thing over there 'river', but none of those labels apply intrinsically. Calling this 'Susan' and that 'river' are completely arbitrary terms that have been applied and stuck through convention. I could call that river a 'vamborg' and it wouldn't change its essential elements—which, again, are the same essential elements that make up our bodies and everything else. The point of all this is that the differences are artificial, and that therefore it is best not to hold too tightly to ideas of ourselves, to who or what we think we are, for we are simply beings exemplifying change. We walk about on the face of the earth but are in fact a part of it. And everyone and everything else is in exactly the same position. Now let's apply this to our lives.

Since all is essentially the same, and all is in a state of never-ending change, we are all linked together in what is only *now*. So don't look down on each other or any of the things around you, for the differences between you are illusory and fleeting, and we are just as much a part of the natural environment as anything else. Treasure each other, treasure our world and all of its inhabitants, and keep your minds squarely on the present, for *it* is the only *real* that there is."

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Those of us familiar with Zen teachings can see the heavy influence they exert here. The Great Teacher may even have noticed a temple tucked away in the woods somewhere that day and been prompted by it to give this speech. Who knows? He was like that. We'd walk for hours and then suddenly out of nowhere he'd have us all sit down and would deliver a lecture. Afterwards he'd take questions for a while, patiently re-explaining his main points or allowing us to discuss things amongst ourselves. It was always very casual, and I never got the feeling that we were being talked down to, even when the Teacher's choice of words made it sound a lot like we were being berated. I think when he said 'you' more often than not he meant all of society and not just us sitting there.

Anyway, about his main points here, I think that practically speaking there are a couple of areas of interest. Keeping your mind on the present is definitely a very hard thing to do, and it's something I've struggled with ever since hearing this talk. He told us to try and focus on our feet as we walked, "Feel every step" is what I think he said. And that is helpful along with some other exercises. But my mind does wander, and often to memories that make me feel ashamed of myself. I guess a lot of people have to

deal with that, and that's one more reason to let go of the past. It's over! Whatever you did you can't undo anyway, so don't worry about it. Something along those lines. It's hard, keeping your mind in the moment, but well worth it if for no other reason than not letting bad memories get to you. Same thing goes for wishful thinking about the future, it's just better left avoided. Why disappoint yourself? The other point that I think is important here is how this helps us relate to others. If we can focus on our similarities with people instead of our differences then we'll be much more likely to get along with them. For me, that's the main thing to take from the last part of the talk here. Some people may be turned off by the grass and river part, but don't let that distract you. If you can see everyone as part of yourself, and yourself as part of everyone, you'll have a much easier time dealing with people, believe me.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *all is changing, no difference between, present-focus* | *1 comment*

Loopyloo says:

Posted 06/10/2011 at 11:59am

I'm the same as a rock? Cuckoo!

## **On living with yourself and others**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 06/15/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“Beth came to me yesterday with a personal problem, seeking my advice. I won’t describe her problem, of course, but suffice it to say that it has to do with certain people that she’s not looking forward to meeting again when she eventually has to. People that have wronged her in the past, and done so in ways such that she now finds it difficult to deal with them. No doubt every single one of us can relate to how she feels, and probably a few people in your own lives have already come to mind. What are we to do in such situations? Are there any rules of thumb that can help us? Or a general outlook we can have that will make issues like this easier? There are a few things I can say here, but first let me emphasize that the place to start, in my mind, is with yourself, and then move on to others.

It is a very difficult thing to change your mind, to alter your thinking process and your worldview generally. This is due to the indoctrination that we were all subjected to as children, the brainwashing that we still suffer from. In our consumerist ‘cultures’ this has meant a number of things. For one, we are taught to value money and the amassing of material goods. We are told that seeking them in the greatest amount possible is not only a healthy lifestyle choice, but an actual goal that we should set as our lives’ standard. We are taught this so thoroughly that it becomes all-consuming in some people, to the point where they are willing to do things that are condemned as being very unethical by the rest of society in order to attain more money and goods. For example, there are the stock traders or loan sharks who prey on would-be investors or borrowers that simply don’t know any better and end up losing everything, greatly enriching the traders and loaners. When this has happened to a drastic enough level that it becomes worthy of a story in the mass media, the perpetrators are shamed publicly and held up as being generally rotten apples. But within the confines of the world in which they operate, nothing could be further from the truth. In a society that values monetary gain above all else, and further preaches the ‘virtues’ of individualism and going it alone—looking after yourself with no outside help and as a prime priority—people like these traders and loaners should be hailed as heroes. They are succeeding splendidly by taking wealth from those unable to protect themselves—that is exactly in line with the system we’ve been raised to believe in and to support. Instead of jail time these greedy geniuses should be elected to the highest offices. Oh wait! They often are! Just in a different form and often with some puppet that is given the role of being the public face of the regime. I must speak to you someday about what a farce our so-called democracies are. So we are taught to hoard and chase after profit, and we are taught that these are exemplary virtues and a basic part of the ‘free’ world. We are also, many of us

anyway, taught that we humans were put here on earth to use it up and spit it out. The great almighty God created this planet for us to wipe our bottoms with, and when we've pillaged it to the point that it can no longer give anything more, well, he'll just snap those magic fingers and make us a new planet. Or he'll zip us all up to heaven where we can dance on golden streets and have endless intercourse with the number of virgins allotted to us based on how well we hated those who were different from us while we were alive. Or maybe we'll have a boring heaven filled with study and small craft activities using egg carton cases. It doesn't matter, because the point is that we can do whatever we want to the planet and then laugh all the way to our graves. We have been taught this; we have been told and told that this is the basis of our existence by our usually well-meaning parents who were taught the same thing by theirs. You see how such ridiculous and inane ideas get passed down from generation to generation, because we love our parents—and rightly so—and trust what they teach us. And they too loved their parents, and so were equally duped, all the way back for hundreds and hundreds of years until we get to the root ideology that started all this nonsense. I do not blame us; I do not blame our parents; I say that people are at heart good and are only made bad by the environments in which they find themselves—it is a societal problem, and much more often than not parents are doing the best job they can with the tools available to them. The problem is with the mindset itself, and since it is ingrained so deeply into each and every one of us, it takes a Herculean effort to change it through standard means. But fortunately there is an alternative method, one that requires just as much discipline but its positive effects can be felt almost immediately and is in practice much simpler to do than to completely re-educate yourself—I'm talking about meditation. You may be surprised to hear me say that, given my very secular views on religion, but the meditation that I advocate does not involve the chanting of a God's name or the

picturing of some holy goat chewing cud or the like, no, what I'm talking about here is simple mindfulness. Sit in silence everyday and simply focus on your breath, or a bodily sensation that catches your attention, or a sound that is compelling. When your mind wanders off, as it will, just pull it back to your breath, that sensation, that sound. This will happen many, many times, but each time you pull your mind back you'll get a little better at concentrating. And that's it, really. Just set a timer and sit, with your eyes open or closed, and try to let your mind be clear, be focused. Worries will crop up, memories will drift across your mental landscape, things you have to do will cry for attention, but just let them evaporate and bring your focus back to your breath. It doesn't matter if you need to do this every other second at first, you will get better and your mind will become clearer. Sit in this way for fifteen minutes everyday, and then extend the time as you see fit, but don't sit for more than forty-five minutes at a stretch. If you keep at this very simple practice, you will find yourself softening, less prone to irritation, to anger, and much more patient and gentle. You will become a better person just by following this process. When you do feel negative emotions arise, notice them and label them for what they are, this will help them dissipate and will also help your mind become more focused on the present. It's really that simple. If you keep at this form of meditation, you will probably also naturally move away from materialism and towards valuing people as equals. These are excellent traits and should be encouraged in yourself. Celebrate the differences you see in others and avoid judging them, for truly we are not at all different from one another in any real and long-lasting sense. Extend this out to all other living creatures as well, for they, just like us, are products of this fair earth and have an equal share in it. We are not the caretakers of the planet; we are *a part of the planet*. It is high time that we recognized that and started behaving responsibly, keeping our environments pristine not only for future generations but for

ourselves and our fellow travelers on this world as well. I would tell you also to value children and your elders, both are better teachers than I and worthy of endless love and respect. Find work that does not harm living beings, this is part of recognizing that we too are the natural products of evolution and can stake no more claim to the earth than any other creature can. This will also help you to value life on the whole, and by extension, your fellow human beings as well. Volunteering to help strangers is another wonderful way to improve yourself and help give some perspective on the problems in your life that you find so overwhelming. Not getting that report done on time will seem much less stressful if you've spent the weekend helping to clean up homes destroyed in a storm or feeding the homeless. Exercise, eat healthily, get outdoors, even if it's only to go for a long walk everyday. These are all very simple things that you can do to help change how you think, and that in turn will help you deal with others. Above all, keep at your meditation and keep your mind in the moment every moment, this will do you wonders.

The other side to all of this self-improvement, this fixing of the damage done to us by our cultures and societies, is remembering that everyone is at a different place developmentally. You want to improve yourselves, you want to have healthier outlooks and be able to deal with people in more productive and positive ways, and that is a wonderful thing. But not everyone thinks the same way. Many are content simply to keep chasing after money and ever bigger homes, vehicles, and toys. Many love their God or Goddess with a depth of emotion that is hard to fathom and would never even consider trading in how that system of belief has taught them to look at life and the world they inhabit. Many hold to cherished political ideologies and ideals of freedom and justice that to them are necessarily bound up with those ideologies. We may well disagree with them and consider their beliefs to be poppycock at

best and dangerous to humanity's survival at worst, but we will not change their minds by arguing with them. Nor should changing their minds be our goal. What we have is the choice of improving ourselves, and what we do with that is entirely up to us—we should not judge each other one way or the other. We should see to it that we also do the same with all those in our lives—have the same patience and tolerance—for proselytizing has and always will win more enemies than friends. When a problem occurs with someone in our lives, instead of acting out of our natural desires to defend ourselves or pushing what we feel to be our rights we should try to look at the issue from their point of view. This will take a great deal of aggression out of the equation. Say, for instance, that you are at the water cooler at work and one of your colleagues approaches. He strikes you as a pleasant man, though you don't really know him that well, so when he engages you in conversation you're happy to respond. After a minute or so of reminiscing about some TV show you both watched the night before, he launches into an elaborate invitation for you to join him at his church the coming Sunday. Your natural inclination is to tell him to shove his stinking Bible right into his sphincter because he's already so full of you-know-what that plugging up the exit hole couldn't possibly hurt anything. But pause a moment here, take notice of your feelings of anger, of resentment at the implication that your personal views are somehow wrong, of your pride and inclination to defend your worldview and by extension yourself. Take a deep breath and as you focus on those feelings, labeling them 'anger' or 'resentment' or 'pride', allow them to pass away and instead put yourself in his position. As nonsensical and laughable as his beliefs may be to you or me, he honestly does accept them and thinks that they hold the value of being *absolutely* true. He really does believe that everyone who isn't a member of the particular denomination, or broader religion, that he belongs to will be damned to an eternity of torment in hell. I know! It's an

entirely ridiculous and completely inhumane belief, but your poor co-worker has been brainwashed into adhering to it since he was a tiny child that couldn't possibly have defended itself from such a concerted mental attack as the one he was subjected to—dragged to church every week by his parents, prayers before every meal and at bedtime, reading the Bible together as a family—it's more than a young mind can bear, much more. And so now in his adulthood, out of a purely good motivation to see those around him join him in heaven, your colleague goes around pushing his beliefs onto others. If you can understand where his behavior is coming from—what really must be acknowledged as a caring attitude—then it's much easier to remain civil with him and not let your negative emotions create a confrontation where none need happen. You can very easily and politely decline his invitation without even going into how stupid you think his beliefs are. If he persists in bothering you in this way, perhaps just tell him that you don't share his faith and wish to be left alone. The important point here is not to let your emotions cause trouble for you and him by putting yourself into a bad mood or by causing yourself to lash out at him. By staying calm you'll have a far more pleasant day everyday. So when you feel your anger bubbling up, your irritation or impatience getting the best of you, take note of that, focus on it, breathe—keep silent for as long as it takes for the emotions to go away, and only then respond. Your co-worker may feel a bit uncomfortable as he stands there at the water cooler waiting for your answer, but that's of no importance. What is important is that you, that we, recognize that every living person in the world is at a different place, accept that in others, and interact in such a way as to maintain our own peace of mind and not cause suffering for those around us. It's a simple matter of consideration, for others and for ourselves.”

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Beth was actually so embarrassed at being singled out in this way that she quit following the Teacher immediately after this. I don't know why she felt that way. From this recording, which is 100% accurate, all he did was use her request for advice as a jumping off point for the lecture. I don't know, it seems a little strange to me. As I recall, she was only with us for a couple of days anyway, so maybe she just felt like she had gotten what she came for and didn't need anymore. There were only a small core of us who followed the Teacher around for the duration, most came and went after a few days, and some only stuck around for one day. They must have been pretty disappointed if that one day they were there he didn't even deliver a lecture!

Anyway, so Beth took off, as I said, and those of us who remained did our best to practice mindfulness and spend some time in meditation every day. And the group vibe did get better, and we did have fewer problems erupt between us, so maybe the Great Teacher was onto something here. Even if he's wrong about that (and I don't think he is), he's certainly right about what a difference it makes to put yourself into other people's shoes. I don't think anyone would argue with that.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *acceptance, mindfulness, patience* |  
*2 comments*

BobReynolds says:

Posted 06/15/2011 at 08:20pm

I don't much care for the way it's delivered, but I do agree with most of the message from your teacher here, sir. Civility is one of

the most important things we had and it's such a damn shame to see so little of it around these days.

Crossroads says:

Posted 06/16/2011 at 10:55pm

It's okay to make fun of Islamic beliefs, and even some of the crazier Jewish beliefs, but you should never make fun of Christian beliefs because they're actually true and so is Hell. God doesn't want to send you there but He will if you don't accept Him so you had better get on your knees and ask for forgiveness right now because if you don't then you'll burn forever and those of us in Heaven will be made to forget about you and your bad choices. It's so easy to become a Christian that you can do it right now in your own home. Just pray and accept Him into your heart, that's it. Amen!

## **On the taking of life**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 06/22/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“The ethics on killing that we have been taught is a system of convoluted and contradictory principles. We have been raised to value this life over that, to esteem one as so worthy of life that it should be protected even at the cost of our own, and the other as being little more than a disposable tool, a means for an end. This has quite naturally led to a tremendous deal of confusion and encouraged, and sometimes even bred, terrible tendencies towards violence, sadism, and even genocide. At the very least it has led to a callousness that is as stunning as it is widespread. There are two prongs to this devil’s pitchfork—to employ an image you don’t need to believe in to be familiar with—one related to our fellow *homo sapiens* and one related to non-human animal life. I do not include non-sentient vegetative life in this analysis as although it does have limited sensory capacities and can register change in its

surroundings to a degree, it is not conscious and does not feel pain in the sense that we use these terms, though as in all things we should keep a sharp eye on what science can teach us here as further advances are made. Some may argue that plant life displays a degree of proactivity—sunflowers moving to always face the sun, for instance—and I would not argue with them there, but this issue of pain and its associative suffering is a paramount one and therefore must be given its proper place in our inquiry.

Let us begin with the issue of killing in the sphere of human life. We are all taught, the world over, that to take another person's life is a terrible sin or crime. Some societies emphasize the religious nature of the act over the secular—a sin so grave you will be damned in some way—and some the secular while ignoring the religious—prison time guaranteed and execution possible in some cultures. Both of these promised retributions are considered to be deterrents, to convince us with such overwhelming force that there can only be negative consequences of killing that we will not even consider it, no matter how justified we may feel the act to be. We are encouraged to find our satisfaction in whatever courts of law our societies offer, ranging from those at the neighborhood/community level all the way to the national or even international. Just how effective these deterrents are can be seen in the fact that murder has been an ongoing issue in societies the world over and does not appear to be going away anytime soon—more's the pity. So why is it that although we are all taught from a very early age not to kill, and are promised terrible punishments if we nevertheless do, that still people are cut down by their fellow human beings daily? My point here is of course not related to military actions—though I oppose those as well—I'm referring to the civilian killing of other civilians, and I'm asking us to consider *why* it is such a problem that seems beyond the wisdom of any of us to solve. Some of you have images of golden watches and

diamond rings, piles of cash and priceless paintings floating in your minds and would offer them as reasons why people are willing to kill one another. Others of you have images of cheating spouses, public humiliations faced, promotions stolen through backstabbing, and would instead present them as the impetus. And still others of you would say that bad genetics or mental illnesses must be the culprits. I would say that you are all right to some degree, that these factors can and do no doubt contribute to such grisly deeds, but that all of them fall short of the mark, they do not strike at the real root of the problem. And that is simply this: We are not taught to respect life. I will even go further and say that despite the best intentions of our parents and other moral guides, we are *not taught* not to kill at all, but rather are encouraged to kill in certain circumstances and discouraged in others. This naturally creates a state of deep confusion in impressionable young minds, and that confusion remains with us right through our adulthood—we carry it with us to our graves. How can I make such a claim, you're wondering? Obviously we're taught not to kill no matter what, that's all there is to it. It's one of the Ten Commandments; it's one of our most harshly punished crimes; it's a universal moral that does not depend on how or where or by whom we were raised. Indeed, it is all those things, and they only serve to show us the remarkable depth of our hypocrisy in that the celebration of killing is still such a staple of our cultures. Allow me to expound on this, and keep in mind that here we are focusing only on the taking of human life by other humans. First of all, there is the obvious example of the presentation of our wars. Our soldiers are treated as conquering heroes; they are lauded for 'protecting our freedoms', for 'keeping our honor', for 'taking the *jihad* to new heights', for 'defending home and hearth'. Individual soldiers have been taught to believe these things as well; it helps them to kill with less hesitation, it makes them more effective at what they have been trained to do—they must not be blamed and hated for acting in the

ways they have been programmed to. Just what our soldiers are accomplishing on their adventures is a point open to debate and beyond the scope of our talk here today, but it would not take a cynic to point out that much more often than not they are employed to further the aims of the wealthy and powerful within our societies at the expense of those in other societies. Regardless, their killing is hailed as bringing victory, as being a necessary evil to secure the ‘peace’, and even, simultaneously, as being *virtuous*. What does this demonstrate? That here, already, we are presented with a conflicting message. Now we have been taught that it is wrong to kill another human being, but here we are celebrating the killing of other human beings by our professional soldiers—strange, don’t you think? What this in fact accomplishes is to deepen the schisms in our mind between ‘us’ and ‘them’—to further develop within us a sense of in-group/out-group distinction. In the past this has been based on race, an easy marker and one that could be ascertained at a glance. ‘Is she one of us?’ ‘No, her hair and skin are a different color.’ ‘I see, do I need to treat her the same way as you?’ ‘Of course not, she does not merit equal valuation because she isn’t one of us.’ ‘Then what kind of treatment does she merit?’ ‘Whatever is expedient to achieving our aims, regardless of the consequences for her.’ This is a very dehumanizing way of considering another, and is meant to be so. If your adversaries can be presented as being less valuable, less *human* than those in the group you wish to promote, it is much easier to treat them terribly and take what you want from them. There are fewer pangs of conscience; and because we are such malleable creatures, so prone to influence and so willing to accept what we’re taught as children, this very negative ethic takes hold in us at a deep level. This is of course beyond being unfortunate: it is tragic. Our evolutionary trait to mimic and learn from our parents and elders—a gift that has enabled us to excel as a species beyond the mere level of survival it likely evolved to initially help ensure—has been twisted into

promoting a competitive spirit that is based on devaluing those members of out-groups to such a degree that we have no problems with brutally killing them and stealing their possessions or resources. And it is precisely this type of thinking that is promoted by our military adventurism and the propaganda machine that goes along with it. Add to this the secondary reasons of how killing is portrayed in our entertainment and reported on in our sensationalist-driven news outlets, and the problem is compounded. Even if we live in a society that no longer bases its ideas of in-group/out-group thinking on race, that thinking still remains in whatever basis has been adopted—religious differences, regional differences, linguistic differences—any tiny thing that can be exploited and given as a reason ‘we’ are distinct from ‘them’. This difference, or a grouping of such differences, is then presented as all the cause needed for the most gruesome acts depicted in our books and films, and sometimes these brutalities are committed against members of the characters’ own in-groups, blurring the line further. Whatever justification is given in the storyline, the end result is the portrayal of killing as being something other than absolutely forbidden, even if it is not necessarily cast in a positive light. This point does not need to be dwelled on; it is an old issue and there are many in-depth discussions on it already available should you choose to pursue them. With our news reporting then, what do we have? Murder and crimes of violence are pushed to the forefront, these stories prick our interests as our entertainment has deadened us to their pain and presented them time and again as exciting plot devices—corollary issues, by the way, to the point I just made on books and films. These are then announced by our newscasters in such a heartless manner that you cannot help but think of the victim in any way other than as a mere statistic. And this is done in the name of objectivity? I say it is done in the name of sales. Sensationalism sells, and our media is extraordinarily profit-driven—make no mistake about that. But for reporters to

overtly sensationalize a crime like murder would be in such poor taste that it would immediately turn off the overwhelming majority of readers and viewers. What's to be done? Well, if it's sales you're after, you present your stories in as titillating a way as possible while keeping a straight face. Give the public the gore it wants but don't pretend to like it—that's the secret. At least ancient Rome had the honesty to glory in the killing of its Colosseum and other arenas! But you see, we're *taught* to crave this violence; we're taught to enjoy it by the endless exposure we're given to it and the propagandic approval it receives when performed by soldiers and fictional heroes. No one deserves to be killed, but we aren't taught that—we're taught that some do. And in this final regard we have our own justice systems to blame. Capital punishment is presented as the ultimate deterrent, an eye for an eye, fairness itself. In the first regard it has failed miserably, areas that execute convicted killers have just as high, if not higher, rates of murder than areas that don't. And as for being fair? Many of our sages have taught us to grow beyond this notion, and the saying, 'An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind' has become a household phrase in many parts of the globe. I do not teach you to turn the other cheek and accept the killing of a loved one in some docile and pathetic manner, but I do say that killing the perpetrator will not bring the victims satisfaction and will ultimately have a very negative influence on society at large. Punish the killers, certainly, but do not take their lives. Or what? Or we are left with a system that teaches never to kill—unless you're the executioner. And what if the courts fail to deliver the verdict you wanted? Do you take it upon yourself to *become* the executioner? Many have, sadly, and the cycle of violence has continued. All of this has led to the very mixed message that we are burdened with today. 'Is it wrong to kill, father?' 'Yes, of course, Billy. But not if you're a soldier, or a hero, or a judge, or a court-appointed executioner, or a police officer in certain

circumstances, or a homeowner defending his goods from being stolen, or...’ Poor confused Billy! Poor confused us! We must learn to value *life*, to truly and unequivocally value life *in all its forms and conditions*, and we must start by properly defining and following our own standard. The taking of another’s life must be strictly prohibited, both by moral code and by secular law. There must be no exceptions to this, and it must be imparted again and again to our children, and to our children’s children, and to theirs, and on and on until we have finally embraced it as the *instinct* it is—we do not start out wanting to kill each other; we are deadened to it via the societal praise it receives in certain circumstances, the callous way it is presented in others, and its use as a ‘natural’ and ‘just’ punishment for actions taken. We should never rejoice in the death of another, even if we’ve been told to consider them our enemy, *even if we do consider them our enemy*, for that is the first step on the terrible road of violence, and each life we devalue in such a way cheapens and taints our own.

And now I will tell you what you do not want to hear, that all of the points I’ve just made about the importance of valuing human life, and the negative mental and societal effects that follow when we don’t, apply also to non-human life. As I mentioned earlier, I want to keep the focus here on non-human animal life, and so I shall. Just as the taking of a human life is a self-degrading act, so also is the taking of a non-human life. It employs the same mindset and uses similar justifications. We have been told that we are above ‘the animals’, that we are separate from them and of a different caliber, a higher being. This, as I tell you so often, is not the case. We are animals; we are products of the planet, and we are not intrinsically better than those that we share the planet with. To value a non-human life more highly than a human life is the same as valuing one human more highly than another. Some may counter that we do this all the time, that we would gladly save the

life of a spouse over that of a stranger, and therefore we are applying a higher value to one. But whom will you choose if the life you can save must be either your spouse's or your child's? And what if the choice is between a sibling and a parent? Or a cousin and a nephew or niece? Or even between total strangers? We do not, in fact, value one human life more than another, what we instead value is one *relationship* over another, even if that relationship is only a very distant or an implied one. Some may also say that if two people are in danger and they can save one, say, the leader of their country or the leader of a neighboring country, they would choose the leader of their own country. Again, all of these choices come down to our in-group/out-group mode of thinking. Us versus them. My family versus other families. My nation versus other nations. *And none of these choices are based on an intrinsic value system that says one type of human being is more worthy of life than another.* When viewed in this way, we do think that human life is of generally equal value; and unfortunately, due to the way we've been taught to think, we also probably place human life above that of non-human life. But I tell you that that is the same mentality that leads to human-human strife, killing, and even as far as genocide. The casual taking of a life solely for one's profit is a degrading act, a dehumanizing act, and creates and fosters a worldview that lessens the value of life across the board; it is a very small step from there to viewing other human beings as being less worthy of life. When we apply in-group/out-group thinking as a justification for dealing out death, we set up a standard in our minds with applications that we could not have foreseen. We may say, 'It's only a pig, it's had a good life, and it'll be tasty and nutritious for me.' It helps that we never actually have to see the pig, or have anything to do with its killing, and can very conveniently enjoy the fruits of other's labor right there on our dinner plates. And I would rejoin, 'It's only a Middle Eastern person, they've had a good life, and I can enjoy the natural

resources their nation has.’ It helps that we don’t have to actually see the person, participate in their killing, and can conveniently enjoy the fruits of other’s labor right there in our gas tank. Or would you prefer that I make that last example plural? That we speak of killing masses of Middle Eastern people rather than just one? Does that sit in your stomachs easier? *It’s the same thing!* Killing scores of people to take their resources stems from the same mentality as killing one person to take their goods *or killing a pig to take its flesh*. All are products of us-versus-them thinking, and all are degrading to our humanity. Some will now say that it’s only natural, that animals kill other animals and since we’re animals—as you yourself state so often, dear Ogden—it makes perfect sense for us to kill and eat as well. Indeed, non-human animals do eat other non-human animals, and will continue to do so even if every single one of us stops, but in their case they are simply acting on their impulses and cannot reason the process out. We can. We have evolved beyond that stage, and it’s high time that we embraced our mental and moral evolution—even challenged it on to new heights. To do otherwise is to degrade ourselves and to promote and prolong the very worldview that has been at the root of nearly every war fought on this planet. *We are equal with each other and all other life is equal with us*—only by viewing ourselves and our relationship with the planet and its inhabitants in this way can we create a mindset that is healthy and productive for all of our human societies and the environments we live in. You may be wondering if I include insect life in this. For me, the pivotal point here is one of suffering, of pain. I do not know how much pain insects feel, and I do not know the extent to which they are self-aware, but I avoid killing them. Why? Let me put it this way: I have no reason to do so. I certainly don’t want to eat any, regardless of the nutritious benefits they may have, so what would be the point? Simply because one is there and I find it revolting? Or that one is flying around my head and bothering me? Or even

that one has bitten or stung me? Such needless killing can only be seen as cruel. Do we strike down other creatures, say, a street cat, because we don't like the looks of them? Anyone would call that a terrible act. Our neighbor's dog is barking in a very annoying manner, so we take our sledgehammers out of our garages and go bash its head in. Our friend's pet bird pecks at us, why not wring its neck? Cruelty. Needless cruelty that only serves to degrade oneself. And I say the same for the taking of all life. The crux of the issue is the causing of pain, the infliction of suffering, as being an act of viciousness and as being self-abasing. Plant life, as mentioned earlier, is not self-aware with a consciousness like ours or other mobile creatures. It is quite simple biologically, and has no nerves to speak of, no pain receptors. Therefore I do not condemn the taking of plant life, and in fact actively encourage vegetarianism as being both humane and conducive to our further growth as a species. It will help us view all living things, especially one another, in a much healthier light and with far greater respect. But I am also a realist, and do not even expect all of you gathered here to be won over by my little speeches, and so in the meantime I say that the very least we can do is to treat our animals humanely. We must stop such cruel practices as those currently being enacted at factory farms and slaughterhouses. We must make ourselves aware of what actually goes on at those places and demand free-range conditions supported by hygienic feed and ample resting areas for our domesticated livestock. If it is an issue of space the problem can be solved by keeping fewer livestock at one farm, with fair recompense for the farmer, of course. You know that this can be done without a change to your lifestyle. And when it comes time to kill the poor animal so that some can eat its flesh, great respect and reverence should be paid to the *sacrificee*, to the living creature that is going silently into the void for no other reason than the *temporary enjoyment* of its eaters—just as much nutritious benefit can be had from a vegetarian diet as from a meat-based one.

I would even say that such ceremonies should be televised; it will help to gradually change people's thinking about the issue and not allow such easy mental escapism as currently happens due to the tendency to not even consider where the chunks of meat in our grocery stores come from. We must respect life, and we cannot truly respect each other's until we have begun to respect it in all of its glorious and multi-faceted forms. Do not take a life. It's as simple a maxim as that, and it doesn't require an elaborate system of exceptions to be piled on top of it."

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The Great Teacher was completely opposed to violence in any form, and he was very expressive on this topic. He was filled with compassion for all living things, to such a degree that it was hard to believe, really. He would even search the ground for bugs before he sat down in a park or outdoors somewhere. I never once even saw him swat a mosquito, he would just shoo it away even if it had already started sucking his blood. His consistency was really amazing, and this lecture here is a sound challenge to all of us. There's no doubt about that.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *killing, non-violence, respect for life*  
| *3 comments*

SusieCue says:

Posted 06/22/2011 at 05:50pm

Peace!

Lucyssky says:

Posted 06/22/2011 at 07:24pm

This is really hard.

Freedom99 says:

Posted 06/25/2011 at 10:45am

Criminals are born, not bred. They need to be killed off, but not by the government, by regular citizens who are armed and not afraid to defend themselves. Don't be fooled, they'd shoot you any day of the week without even thinking twice about it. Same goes for foreigners in wartime, we have every right to kill them no matter who they are or what they did if we're at war with them. Peace and prosperity come from killing.

One good thing about your post is that now I'm hungry for a steak!

## **On core values**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 06/29/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“You will have heard that faith, hope, and love are the three greatest virtues, the primary values that we should all hold, that we should all strive to incorporate into our lives. I would agree that love is indeed a very important trait, but would add a caveat to it, and so I say rather to be guided by compassion, patience, and tolerance. These are my core values, and spare me a few moments to explain why the old three are inadequate and why the new three are so necessary for us today.

Faith is misleading and often misplaced. People will talk about having faith in a great many different things: in ideas, in beliefs, in their family and friends, in their leaders, even in mechanical or electrical goods. But just what are they getting at when they speak in these terms? Generally the phrase is used to indicate a deep level

of trust, a willingness to hand over responsibility. You can hear this in such statements as, ‘I have faith that my team will win the championship this year’, or, ‘I have perfect faith in his ability to finish the project before the deadline.’ In both cases we have expressions that are grounded in experience; the favored sports team performed well last year perhaps, or added a new and very talented player to the squad in the former example, and in the latter the speaker knows his or her co-worker to be a competent and diligent person based on having worked together with them for a period of time. Most uses of ‘faith’ when employed regarding practical situations are of this type—grounded in experience and expressing a mixture of informed optimism and trust. Faith in ideas can also be grounded in personal experience in this way, and has the great advantage of being able to be argued logically and considered from many angles; and, as we all know, some people will even argue that a faith in beliefs—religious faith—can also be based on events that have occurred in their lives which they feel gives credence to them. Arguing against such claims strikes me as being rather pointless; whatever counter-arguments you present you will likely be refuted by the insistence that the arguer ‘felt it’ or ‘knows it to be true’, and when someone has convinced themselves of something that is essentially in the realm of fantasy very little can be said to make them change their minds. What I would like us to consider is not whether or not someone’s conviction in the rightness of their beliefs is based on solid evidence, but rather the psychological implications behind a faith itself. By placing trust in something that cannot be empirically proven—and this applies almost exclusively to religious faith as opposed to the other uses of ‘faith’ that we’ve discussed—a person is setting their mind to having expectations for outcomes that are beyond their control. Should those outcomes fail to materialize, what happens to their faith? Is it shaken? Do they lose it? Or do they tell themselves—or listen to others who tell them—that they

didn't 'believe enough'? Or that, and this is particularly true of some religious traditions, it's impossible for them to know the mind of God and therefore they should 'let go' and have even more faith? I agree to let go, drop that faith right in the toilet and bid a fond farewell to it! The rational is where we should be placing our faith, and beyond such simple uses of the term as faith in this or that tool, that person or group, rationality can be found only in the realm of ideas as regards the virtue of faith. A scientist can have a great deal of faith in a certain experimental method, and this is based both on personal experience with the method and others', and also grounded in the well thought-out basis for the method itself. Theories of human behavior, or social organization, can likewise have their basis in experience—the results of experiments tried and lessons learned, and the confidence that emerges from an informed debate on the topic where the principles of logic have been strictly applied. None of these qualify faith as a cardinal virtue, however, and where these elements are missing—these important empirical elements of observation and/or experience—faith is often left blind; it is reduced to a simple trust that everything will work out as one hopes—and what if it doesn't?

Which brings us to hope, the even less qualified younger brother of faith, the runt in the family of lost causes that screams for attention and is given it only because reality, the stern father of the household, is too terrible to behold. Hope is, quite simply, nothing more than wishful thinking, and as such it has caused an enormous amount of pain the world over and throughout history. We hear that Pandora opened the box she was given and all of the evils that plague us were released into the world, leaving only hope left inside. And we suppose that this is meant for our comfort? Hope is the expectation of that which we have no reason to expect, the wistful dreaming of those who would rather bury their heads in the sand than actually make the necessary efforts to change their situations. Hope is *not* optimism; being optimistic is to have a

mindset that something, or things generally, will improve *because of an outside force improving them* or *because of our efforts to do so*. I see the improving moral conditions of mankind and am optimistic that such positive trends will continue, that the same process of evolution that has led us to where we are today will continue to pressure our societies—as we are hyper-social creatures—towards greater levels of fairness and equality. And I apply this optimism to my small efforts to make the world around me better, but I am hopeful for nothing because my positive thinking is *grounded* in my historical observations and experience with all kinds of people. Hope is by definition *groundless*; it is based on nothing other than the same kind of insipid escapism that leaves people daydreaming about what they'll do in heaven. What cause do we have for such nonsense? None whatsoever, of course, and as such we shouldn't even give hope the benefit of the doubt as we do with faith; we should address it for what it is: a bane on our minds and a generator of nothing but disappointment. Hope *misleads* us into doing nothing for ourselves in a far worse way than faith does—at least faith is directed at an outside element, hope is directed at nothing in particular at all; it is a shot in the dark, an outcry to a passive universe that will not take sides. Hoping for something is even more useless than praying for something—as hard as that is to believe—because at least when people pray they also generally *do something*—praying for a new job but also applying for one, for instance—but when people hope they *do nothing at all and expect everything!*

Love is the final value to consider here, and as I said I largely agree with the importance this is given in the old way of thinking, but would adjust our views of it slightly. Love can blind us to reality even more so than faith can, and though this gives it its tremendous strength, it is also of course its Achilles' heel as a refusal to see things how they really are quite naturally leads to all

kinds of strife, disappointments, broken hearts, and depression. Love can also lead to very strong attachment, which, again, gives it and those who hold it great strength, but it also sows the seeds of deep pain. Change is the only constant we can depend on: all that we have and all that we are and all those we know are subject to this same unbreakable rule of change. All those we love will someday face the same fate that every living creature must: death. It is a torment for many to lose those they love, and this is very understandable and we should have nothing but compassion for those in pain from this experience. But it is an experience that we will all have to face at some point in our lives—it is unavoidable. And therefore, since this pain is so great and so beyond our control, love should be applied universally to soften these blows. Love all and be attached to none. Live with those closest to you with a mind in the moment, appreciate their presence and your mutual love now with no expectations that it will last forever—for nothing can. Love them fully each and every moment but remain in those moments and do not project a false future onto your relationship. Make plans together, of course, but do not hold any more tightly to those plans than you do to anything else. Universalize your love for all living creatures, and let go of your fears and worries regarding those you love most—for we cannot really help but love some more than others even if we attain non-attachment to all—for those fears and worries will not be fully realized and when they do come they will not happen in a way you could have predicted. So keep your love, and love deeply, but in a way that avoids attachment, and as much as possible love all of those around you, for we all deserve to be loved.

What are our core values then? What can we replace faith, hope, and love with? With compassion, patience, and tolerance, as I've said. Compassion is the concern we have for the suffering of others, even if we haven't experienced that suffering ourselves and have a

hard time relating to it. We can see that a person or non-human animal is in pain, is troubled, and we can extend our sympathies to them. This is extremely important, for turning oneself off to the suffering of others has the same consequences as actually causing suffering in others—whether directly or indirectly. This does not mean to sacrifice everything in our lives in order to always help others—I am not advocating that we all martyr ourselves to the world—but it does mean doing what we can to alleviate suffering when we can, and when we can't simply be there for the creature in need. Listen to the complaints of others; give them the emotional support they are in need of; often that's all that people want from those in their lives. And let this compassion cool your mind when others are acting aggressively towards you or in a way that causes you pain—there is a reason for their behavior, and lashing out at them, or nursing a grudge for them, will not help you see the reason. Have the fortitude to be patient with them, and rather than blaming them for their poor choice of actions try to imagine what could be at the root of those actions. And here we have our second value—patience, working hand in hand with compassion. We must understand that everyone is at a different place in their lives, that we are all walking our own paths and carrying our own burdens down them. You have dropped everything in your lives to follow me around as I aimlessly wander these country roads, and I must say, I'm very impressed. Do that now with your minds. Be a nomad in spirit—mentally, you understand; I am not speaking metaphysically here—even when you have stopped being one in body. Be rooted nowhere and learn the patience of the road, the patience of the unexpected, the patience of letting things that are beyond our control be as they are because they cannot be any other way anyway. And apply this most of all to other people, for what on this great earth is more unpredictable than us human beings? We are glorious creatures, no doubt about it, but we are wild and can seem positively mercurial.

This is one of our charms, I suppose, so embrace it with all the patience of a river, steadily flowing and never once forcing. Our last value is also closely related here: tolerance. Where patience is calmly waiting and understanding, tolerance is calmly understanding and accepting of that which we would change if we could. The difference here is quite subtle, as I use the terms, and of course some will use these same terms interchangeably. What I mean by patience is waiting it out with someone, being there for them as they are; tolerance is also waiting it out, but beyond simply being there for them we are also accepting of the fact that we can do nothing but be there—we cannot change them or work with them towards change that they themselves do not want. Patience would have us work things out, little by little and for however long it takes, but tolerance has us simply accept and try nothing. Care for them without making any effort whatsoever for adjustments; and this goes all the more so for situations or aspects of a broader generality that we may even be against but are currently beyond us. I am very opposed to our consumer-driven culture and the horrible, sickly worldview it has instilled in people, but since I cannot remake the entire system by myself overnight, in the meantime I want to work for change with those I can and care for all, even those who would set themselves up as my enemies. This is tolerance—this is acceptance of what we would have otherwise. And this, clearly in a world as diverse as ours, is a value that cannot be overemphasized. So we have compassion, patience, and tolerance. We have our core values and underlying all of them we have our common humanity. Let's always start from there.”

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This was one of the earlier lectures that I saved for the latter half of my little blog. By this point I hope (I'm not using that word in the

sense the Teacher spoke against!) that you have seen how really all of the Great Teacher's ideas flow together. We can't really have this great tolerance for all if we don't also accept that we're all equal humans and none of us have all the answers. If we think that our group is going to heaven and everybody else is going to hell, or that we alone can save society and all the other similar groups are just *wrong enough* to mess everything up, then we can't have the kind of patience and tolerance he spoke of here, to say nothing of compassion. The insistence in the rightness of yourself or your group is antithetical to compassion. Wow! I should write that down. ☺ What I mean, of course, is that the Teacher really gave us a way of looking at life and seeing the big picture in a way that is healthier all around. He could be a real bull at times, charging his way through a topic and tossing aside opposing viewpoints like they were nothing to even consider, but at heart he wanted the best for everybody and wasn't afraid to admit when he was wrong about something. Those are two qualities I know I could use, and maybe a lot of other people, too.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *compassion, patience, tolerance* | *1 comment*

BobReynolds says:

Posted 07/01/2011 at 9:43am

If it's all the same to you, good sir, I'll keep my faith, hope, and love. But I like your teacher's trio too, and now that I'm an old man with nothing to lose maybe it's time I had a bit more compassion, patience, and tolerance myself.

## **On ownership and letting go**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 07/06/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“The question of what can and cannot be owned has been a contentious one throughout history, as has the deeper question of the value of ownership itself. In ancient times, and then, sadly, tragically, right through to modern times, some of us actually *owned* others of us. In many cases this occurred as a consequence of military domination by one group over another; Rome’s many, many slaves—at one point about one-third of the Empire’s population—were usually prisoners of war—but far before Rome even existed conquered peoples wound up in subjugation. This even happened within nations; Greek city-states would sometimes enslave the citizens of other Greek city-states following a war—though that was just one of many ways a person in ancient Greece could become a slave, and really, the idea of a single nation didn’t exist in their minds in the way it does in ours. Contrary to what our

modern notions of the practice likely are, slavery was practiced for thousands of years in a form that was not necessarily based on racial differences. And it still occurs today in a form not technically based on racial differences, though the argument could be made to the contrary. What are we to make of this? Have we moderns not progressed at all in our thinking? In our moral judgments? I believe that we have, to a large degree, evolved a higher intuitive sense of ethics, of fairness amongst ourselves, but that that sense is easily dismissed through willful ignorance, and the same mentality that allows us to tacitly condone modern slavery is applied in a more widespread way to the question at hand—the value of the ownership of things, of private property, of this-is-mine and that-is-yours, of get-your-hands-off-my-stuff, of go-buy-your-own, of all the desire, attachment, anger, jealousy, and strife that comes from *things*. To illustrate my point let me first comment on our views on slavery today, and how we not only allow it to continue but actually work to expand it by participating in the cycle of consumerism with such gusto. Most of us would readily agree that slavery is an abhorrent institution, justly condemned, and has no place in the modern world. We shudder at the thought of one human being owning another—as well we should. Our condemnation of such an act carries with it a mental image of people laboring under the hot sun in a large cotton field, sugar cane field, tobacco field; we associate slavery with outdoor agricultural work and also, more likely than not, Caucasian colonizers or descendants of colonizers and abducted African men and women or indigenous peoples. Our image of slavery is based on recent history rather than ancient, and how we approach the topic generally remains locked into that particular historical period. Many people today would either refute that slavery still exists in the world at all, or would claim that it only exists in some remote jungle corner where modern culture has yet to have an impact. Here I want to take a moment to repeat that we are right to

condemn slavery, it *is* an abhorrent institution that should never have existed at all—whether we’re considering the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Persians, Romans, or other archaic group, or whether we’re considering American and Caribbean white farmers, or even whether we’re considering the Nazis and their concentration and labor camps. But we need to be far more realistic, far more *honest* about the slavery that still exists today and then take that same scrutinizing honesty and point it at the larger issue of private property in general. So, to continue, many would either insist that slavery is a thing of the past or only occurring in such remote areas and in such small numbers that it is almost the same as being a thing of the past—yet I counter that slavery today is all around us; we simply don’t see it, don’t think about it. How can I make such a claim? What we need to establish before going any further is our definition of slavery. As I said, most of us have an image of institutional slavery that is locked into the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. We imagine groups of men and women doing physical labor outdoors all day, and then sleeping in large family units in small one-room shacks, unable to make any decisions about anything of substance in their own lives. This is one definition of slavery. I also mentioned Rome, and remarked on how many slaves the Empire had, men and women who were of different work categories: some were house slaves that tutored children, cooked, fetched water, mended clothes or did other chores, some were farm slaves that fit the image we already have, some were construction slaves that built the roads and aqueducts, and some were underground slaves that worked the mines for the gold, silver, and jewels coveted by the wealthy. All of these people too were unable to make decisions about anything of substance in their lives. This is another definition of slavery. What do these two have in common? Forced labor and the inability to make decisions about personally substantial matters. Can this then be our definition of slavery? Let’s take a look at its two

elements as they relate to our modern situation: Forced labor—well, we all have to do that, really; only very few of us would continue doing our jobs if we didn't have to make money to support ourselves and our families. An incapability regarding decision-making—again, many of us feel that way about ourselves: we live in a place we can afford but would perhaps prefer another; we work where we do for the wages we earn but would perhaps rather do something else; we drive or ride what we do because it's paid for, or nearly paid for, and cannot afford a new vehicle; in short, we are hindered from making the choices we'd like to by financial concerns. Logically then, we too are slaves, so to speak. Wage-slaves, enchained by money. We have it much better than any of the slaves we've discussed so far, certainly, but we are still a long ways from being free. Now, we need to work, and we need to feed ourselves of course, so how can we do that and not remain the wage-slaves we are? First and foremost, by doing jobs that we actually like and are actually suited for. Instead of searching for the needle-in-a-haystack job that actually appeals to us, we should be guided in that direction from an early age by our schooling, based on our natural abilities, and trained to do well what we're already innately gifted to do. Rather than toiling away at jobs we hate, checking the time every five minutes to see when we can clock out, we could be engaged in fulfilling careers that bring much satisfaction, a sense of identity and belonging, and the motivation to work hard—because we love our work. It's *enjoyable* for us. We should all have that as a basic, guaranteed part of our lives. The other side of the coin here, financial concerns and the burdens they place on us, reveals the much uglier side of modern wage-slavery. There are thousands of young children, women, and men all over this planet that are toiling in gruesome conditions, not much better than those of the ancient world and indeed, in some cases, much worse. Innocent children who are forced to work in tiny places that adults can't fit into or do things that adults can't do: fixing

machines or cramped in tunnels or applying their nimble fingers to delicate work. These children should be in school; they should be running and playing with their friends; they should be shouting gleefully to one another and chasing each other around. Their parents probably fare no better; also working menial jobs that bring no satisfaction for very low pay, or forced into even more dangerous and demeaning labor such as waste yard scavenging or prostitution. What causes all this? The need for money, the need to pay for the basic necessities in life. These things too should be guaranteed for all, and they easily could be if only the wealth in society were distributed more evenly. These are clearly avoidable tragedies that are being repeated all around the world from generation to generation—and what is the driving factor behind much of this? Why does the need for money hurt the poor of the world, especially the poor of underdeveloped or developing nations, so much more than it does those in wealthier nations? Clearly because we are the rich Romans of the modern age. Our lust for gold rings and shiny trinkets forces the poor down into the mines, into the choking fumes and permanent dark. But at least they have jobs, at least they're able to feed their families, some will say. *But they could have jobs that pay decent wages and are conducted in a much safer and more fulfilling manner if only we weren't so addicted to the cheap goods they produce!* Have we no heart at all? How can we blithely shop for this and that knowing the real cost *in human suffering* that each little plastic doodad entails? Because we turn our minds off to that suffering—and why do we do this? Because we *want*, we crave things, we lust for what we do not have and want to get it as cheaply as possible *so that we can buy more*. And this is the real crux of the matter, our attachment to things.

Just as we have taken a hard look at our past and seen the terrible acts our ancestors have committed, and judged them to be so, we

need too to take a hard look around ourselves today and see just what our constant need to consume has produced in the world. We are obsessed with private property, with owning things and amassing things, and it's never enough for any of us. We no longer simply want to keep up with our neighbors; we now want to keep up with all of the people we'll never meet but see on TV. We want to have better things than those around us to show off how 'successful' we are, to display what we deem to be our social status to the world in ever more extravagant forms. We push ourselves deeper and deeper into debt in order to keep buying, to keep upgrading, to keep attaining that which realistically we cannot afford. This has fueled the inequalities in the world today and been a major cause of the suffering of many in developed nations—who have lost their jobs or homes or worse—and even more so in developing nations where wages are low and companies can go to maximize their profits by keeping their overhead to a minimum. Why pay someone forty-some dollars an hour to do the same job that a person living elsewhere will do for a dollar an hour? From a purely profit-driven perspective it makes perfect sense. But why even pay that person a dollar? Surely costs can be cut somewhere and even more profits gained? So now that formerly dollar an hour worker has their healthcare benefits slashed, if they had any to begin with, and since their country has no national healthcare system they had just better not get sick or injured. Nor had their children. And on and on this crushing cycle goes, grinding out exploitation and hastening millions the world over to their graves. But our cars are much cheaper now! Even if we recognize this tragedy, if we see what we're doing to others all over the planet and try to shop responsibly, we still often fail to see what we're doing to ourselves. The obsession with owning that consumerism has bred into us has led to a deep emotional attachment to the things that we have. Think about this with me for a moment: If your house were on fire, what one thing would you

run back into the flames to retrieve? What object would you risk your life to save? Please tell me that right now you're thinking of nothing! No matter how important a thing may be, even a favorite photo of a loved one, it is still just a *thing* and never worth a human life. Yet we don't see this. There are even people who will actually *kill* another human being in order to protect the junk they've piled into their homes. Can you imagine it? Murdering a person for the sake of a TV? How have we come to the place in our societies that we value an entertainment box over the life of another human being? It is a sad, sad commentary on our times. We must cut the ties that bind us to the things in our lives by being willing to lose them. Do not hold onto anything, for no matter how badly we may want something to, nothing lasts forever—especially material objects. Just as we have been trained to want, taught to crave, and encouraged, prodded, coerced to always buy, buy, buy to keep the sickening economic cycle we're in constantly spinning, we can teach ourselves to quit, to get out of the hamster's wheel we're madly running in and free ourselves of our addiction. I'm not saying that we need to live as paupers, that we should give away everything we have, but rather to hold lightly to the things in our lives, to consider them not to be more important than they are—and I think that you'll find that nearly everything you own isn't really all that important. When you see something that you want, hesitate, examine your desire for it—what is it based in? Do you really need that thing? Stop impulse buying and stop seeking happiness through shopping; it is a fleeting and false sensation. And when you do need to make a purchase do it as responsibly as you can, favor companies that make efforts to treat their workers well, that give benefits and pay decent wages, and that are concerned about the environmental impact they have. In our broken and calloused system that treats people so poorly, that wrings the maximum profit out of all of us for the minimum investment on its part, it does take some effort to buy ethically; but

that effort is so worth it for the positive effect it has. As will be the effort it takes us to break out of the mental prison of consumerism, to *let go* of all the tiny, stupid little things that cling to us and weigh our lives down. This push away from materialism must be something that we teach our children; it should be a part of the education we all receive, but in the meantime, with even publicly funded schools at the mercy of for-profit companies, it is something that we'll have to do ourselves. But act by act and day by day as we make the necessary endeavors, and commit ourselves to continuing to do so, we'll make the world a little bit better—and these improvements will accumulate and spread. Just like the sickness of consumerism, the cure is contagious.”

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This is a very important topic, I think, and that's why I wanted to post it here towards the end of the files that I have. The Great Teacher also delivered this to us very early on in our time together. I remember that back then there were only about three of us following him around, and later I wondered why he didn't repeat this lecture after more people had joined our little group. But I guess he didn't have to because by then we had already established a group dynamic and a large part of that was sharing what we had. This sharing turned out to be quite catching, after only a day or two of hanging out together people would begin to offer whatever they had extras of. And when we all ran out of something we took it in turns to replace it. Looking back on it, it was really nice, the way we never really had to stress about not having something. That's the key point here, too, I think: not stressing about material goods. I mean, even if we all ran out of something as essential as toilet paper, we made do with what was available until we got more. And in the process we learned that even toilet paper wasn't as essential as we all thought it was.

The other part of this is very important too, I think. Our world is so interconnected that if we aren't careful something as simple as buying a cup of coffee or tea can contribute to real pain for people we've never met. I share the Teacher's vision of a society that's based on valuing human beings and not just money. But we don't live in a society like that yet, so until then the least we can do is to shop ethically. It only takes a bit of effort, and if you really do care about the well-being of the world and its people, then it's worth it. We all just have to chip in.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *attachment to things, materialism, wage-slavery* | *2 comments*

SusieCue says:

Posted 07/07/2011 at 07:30am

Read those labels, people!

Lucyssky says:

Posted 07/07/2011 at 12:34pm

I hear you, SusieCue. A little effort goes a long way.

## **On thinking for yourself**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 07/13/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“I’ve heard some of you remarking recently that when this is all over—for you know that it must end—you’ll feel terribly alone and that you have no one to talk to, no one who really understands where you’re coming from. I have good news for you on both accounts: *This* will only end when you choose for it to, when you yourselves stop making the efforts you have been; and the world is full of people who understand, but unfortunately many of them are now the world’s filling. Don’t chew on that one for too long; it’ll all be clear in a moment.

Now I don’t mean to imply that our little extended rendezvous out here in the wilderness will last forever, I’m already very tired and am looking forward to being on my own again. No, we will part our ways sooner or later, but when we do you’ll still have by far

the most important aspect of what you've worked for, what you're achieving and can continue to grow in—your mental training. All of the discussions and lectures we've taken part in have been aimed at training your minds, getting you to think about your world in new ways, to see your surroundings, your cultures, your lives, in a different way. I have tried to show you that the mentality we were raised to adopt—the blinders that we were all tricked into accepting by the dominant views and associated conventions of the cultures we grew up in—is not our only choice. We can adopt a completely different mindset, an alternative worldview, a new way of *thinking, assessing, responding* to everything on this great planet—we have the power of that choice and we can shape our minds, and our lives, in any way that we see fit. We do not have to remain victims of our cultures. We do not have to be cogs in the consumerist machine. We do not have to be lemmings running off the cliff of our 'free democracies' with a wad of cash in our mouths. The choice is ours, and making it does not mean that we have to opt out; that you have to become a wandering vagrant and half-mad troubadour like me, pecking away at the remains others have discarded for your sustenance, warmed only by the fire of your philosophy. No, that is not any of your paths, I think, and I am grateful for that. What you can do, what you *will* do, is to re-enter society as new men and women, taking the vast problems our short-sighted leaders and their blind followers have created head-on and offering another way. An alternate reality that *we can create*, a better life that *can be had*, and it all starts with how the world appears to us when we've opened our eyes. How we *make* the world appear to us. What I'm referring to is of course our worldviews—our analysis of our environment in all its aspects. It is not enough to simply be intelligent, to make yourself smarter, more educated, more knowledgeable. What matters far more is that we do actually *analyze* our world—not simply accept it for what it is, how it appears at the moment. Note that here I'm not referring

to our reality generally, which we can do nothing but see as it is, but rather I'm talking about our *human* world: the one we've built around us. Far too many people today do not think about the culture they inhabit, the world they live in or the reasons why it's in the condition it currently is. They merely accept. They wake up in the morning and their minds are filled with the little things that they must do that day, the work that needs to be done, the chores that must be taken care of, and then later on the rewards they'll give themselves. In many ways this is a normal response; we all have many things to attend to on a daily basis and it's only natural that they become primary concerns. The problem occurs when this becomes the entirety of people's lives, when they are so distracted by what they must do, and when that's finished by the myriad entertainments on offer, that they cease to really care about anything else, about the greater issues that society faces, the problems that currently exist, that will likely come to exist, and that must be solved. Oh, I know that every so often there's a vote and about half of those who can dutifully go to the designated places and cast their opinions in some way, but the system is so pathetically rigged in favor of a small band of the ultra-wealthy that they're wasting their time by participating. We don't have a say in our governments, and we don't have a say in the direction our countries are headed; ignore the cunning banter by the very wealthy running the system who tell us that we do. Instead, *change your mind!* Analyze your culture, see its faults, see its strengths, and live your ordinary life in a way that is much healthier and much more adapted to the situation you were born into. Don't simply give in to the nonsense that bombards us daily; rather absorb what is being blasted at you, turn it over, look at all of its nooks and crannies, and then decide what you'll do with it. What I mean is this: Say that you arrive at work one morning and, as per usual, turn on your computer to check your email and also see the news of the day. No new mails, so you close your inbox and load

your favorite news site—or, more likely, it loads automatically—and the day’s headline banner is that the victorious troops of your nation have captured and killed the declared public enemy number one, the so-called nefarious arch-enemy and dread rival of everyone. You see images of people shouting for joy at this, jumping up and down outside in great crowds and waving national flags in a genuine outpouring of euphoria. How do you respond to this? Do you run to an office window to see if people are still out there dancing in the streets like they were the night before when you foolishly went to bed early and missed all the hoopla? Do you jump up and down yourself proclaiming loudly what a glorious day it is for all of you and how you’ve all smashed yet another pretender to the crown that can only be worn by your nation’s chosen leader? Do you revel in the death of a fellow human being, drooling like a Pavlovian dog with the response that you’ve been so carefully programmed to give? Or do you think about the event’s *meaning*? Do you rather ask yourself why? Why should I be gladdened by the murder of another, even if that person did terrible things in their own lifetime? Why should I even feel that this individual was some kind of personal adversary of mine, of me directly? Why was this act—this assassination—even conducted in the first place and—much more importantly—what led up to the situation in which we find ourselves? *Why is the world as it is?* Nothing happens in a vacuum, every effect has its cause, and that some stranger in a far-away land should feel sufficient reason to undertake a series of actions that labels him or her as ‘public enemy number one’ of a completely different nation must be grounded in a number of very serious antecedents. I’m sure you all know what I’m referring to here, and in no way do I justify or support the views of those who would use violence to achieve their ends. But their grievances are real, and instead of glorying in their deaths we ought to consider just how we ended up in such a loathsome place. And that is my sole point—that we consider. That

we take a look at our world, our cultures, our ways of thinking, and analyze them according to reason. That we do not simply accept what we're told, that we do not simply buy what we're shown in ads, that we do not simply surrender to one particular way of living as being *the only way of living*. That we think! We must always use our minds to come to our own conclusions, regardless of what those conclusions may be. As things stand now, we have been saddled with a lie. We have been burdened with a false responsibility in our politics; we have been tricked into thinking that our votes matter, that the people we elect to represent us actually *do* represent us; I have shown that this can never be the case in the full sense of how it's promised and presented by our pathetic democracies. Free yourself from this; free your mind from the consumerist clap-trap that fuels such a deceitful and empty system; change your thinking to make it truly your own. And if, after a reasoned analysis, you still want to triumph in the world around you rather than dissect it, that choice too is yours. But do not stop analyzing, never stop thinking, for if we do we can only drift back into neutral and cease being the directors of our own minds—resulting in our return to the brain-dead, to the placid, to the chain-gang slaves of the disgusting system that we suffer under. And *that* is when this will all end for you, when our fantastic voyage will reach its final shore and you discover that it looks exactly like the place you embarked from. No, the voyage must *never* end, we must never give this up.

And how can this be? When I've finally managed to evade all of you stubborn followers, how can your journeys continue in my absence? Quite easily, you'll see, and all under your own direction—with a lot of help from the dead. My friends, we are the thinkers, we are the brave, we are those who embrace life and revel in it. Where others shut up and shut down, content to participate in their own mental slaughter at the hands of a system that has

evolved solely to wring profit from them, silently submitting to a culture that has degenerated to mean little more than the plastic knick-knacks it fills their homes with and the empty junk food it fills their bellies with, pretending all the while that they are free and in control, we, my brothers and sisters, we tear our eyes open and force our minds awake, we scream at the banal and tear down all the old idols, we create out of ourselves our own gods—we *create ourselves as gods*—we say yes to this life and embrace it fully, as only those who are truly alive can. But do not be mistaken; we are not the first to do so. Many have followed the very path we now tread, and did so with just as much courage and tenacity as you now demonstrate, and what they left behind can be a tremendous comfort to you in your struggles, guides along the way and friends to share the road with. In short, I would have you be readers. Read widely and continuously, and do not waste your time with the cookie-cutter toilet paper that passes as the ‘modern novel’, the pulpy blathering that does little but ape the mainstream film industry, derivatives of our societies’ relentless push for profit at all costs, void of any artistic content. There are many intriguing works of fiction being written today, of course, but you must search for them in places far beyond the reach of the giant publishers; they will only touch what they believe will maximize their investment and as such limit what they publish to what is esteemed to sell most widely—namely, the lowest common denominator, the least thought-provoking and easiest to stomach tales of insipidity available. At any rate, I would treat such excursions as breaks, as time off. For we must be learners, we must give ourselves to a regimented diet of knowledge—ingest history, philosophy, the natural sciences, any and all fields that will give a broader view of the world we inhabit and the myriad peoples and creatures that inhabit it with us. History is especially important here, I think, as it will illuminate all other aspects of the authors we read—for they too were products of their times, victims of their

cultures, and to read them in the absence of the background in which they came to live is to read them poorly—or worse, to misread them. Far too many suppositions have been foisted onto thinkers of the past by readers who placed them in the wrong context, or who were ignorant of their context altogether. So we must do away with our prejudices and get our hands dirty in the very important work of freeing our minds. We will find ideas that will appall us, treatises that will seduce us, modes of life that will fascinate us, and antecedents that we will find illuminating. Most of all we will find ourselves. Each of us will discover just what exactly it is that *we* think, the conclusions that *we* have come to, the judgments that *we* discern—and they will be our greatest treasures. No longer will we simply take for granted what it is that we are told, what we are taught, what has already been worked out *for us*; that which is given to us most freely must be analyzed most closely of all. We must find our own values and set the trajectory for our own lives. Above all, we must think for ourselves and take comfort in the many before us who have done the same, find in them our friends and compatriots if we cannot find like-minded wanderers in our midst. We must open our minds as widely as we can and, through a deep exploration of any and everything, build our own systems of thought. And then, when all is said and done and we have every confidence in ourselves and the mindsets we have forged, we must keep the floodgates open for there is always more to learn, more to ponder, more to *be*.”

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It was dark and rainy when the Teacher delivered this lecture. It had been raining for days as I recall, and we were all feeling a bit down. Our clothes were soaked, our tents were getting moldy from always being wet, and we hadn't had a hot meal for at least a couple of days. It was pretty miserable, and I'm sure the Teacher

meant for this to cheer us all up. He could be terribly impatient with us at times, especially when more than one of us asked the same question or wanted something repeated. But with the weather he always just shrugged his shoulders. Guess he figured there was nothing he could do about it so it was pointless getting upset.

This talk is actually one of my favorites. I've always taken a great comfort in books, and I've always felt like I could really connect with certain writers even if they were long dead, so it was very reassuring to hear the Great Teacher say the same things. It took me years and years to get over all the crap that was foisted on me in my childhood by school, parents, and everybody else who wanted me to be a little reproduction of them or a little patriot or a little whatever, and reading widely was definitely a big part of that. I don't know if I can say that I've "forged my own mindset", but I'm much closer to it than I was, and I'm much more at ease with myself than I've ever been. People will tell you all the time to be skeptical, and that's good advice I think, but actually creating your own way of thinking, your own way of looking at the world, well, that takes a whole lot more than just being skeptical. But it's still worth the effort it takes. If you ask me, that is.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *critical analysis, reading widely, thought system* | 2 comments

Captainjack says:

Posted 07/14/2011 at 04:32pm

man i hate reading books movies are way better so i just wait for them to come out

Freedom99 says:

Posted 07/16/2011 at 10:15am

Are you still posting here, Captainjack?

I totally agree with this post. Our schools do a terrible job of getting us to think for ourselves, but they're probably still better than in a lot of other countries. Anyway, I think you've got to find your own road, as the Teacher says, and even if you disagree with somebody you should listen to what they have to say. The important thing is to keep talking about this stuff, and I hope the next post gets back to politics because that's what I really love talking about.

## **On past failures and what they can teach us**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 07/20/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“I’d like to spend the next few days speaking a little about politics and governance. These issues are far more important than we tend to give them credit for being, but considering what a terrible mess our current governments are in, and the way everything has been manipulated to serve the wealthy elite, it’s not surprising that our disillusionment has taken us all the way down the tracks of frustration to their final stop of nihilistic apathy. Just what is the point in even trying? And those men and women of the past who did try, who did work—sometimes for their entire lives—to effect real change, have been vilified to such an extreme degree that most now find it distasteful to even discuss them—let alone what they stood for. So spare me your ears for a while, and explore along with me some of the failures of our past century and what we can take from them today.

To begin, I'd like to make a very important definitional distinction that has been completely glossed over in modern usage: that between socialism and communism. The confusion between these terms is entirely understandable as the nations that undertook communist revolutions ended up having governments that operated in largely socialistic ways, and in many cases even referred to their own methods as being socialist—an explanation that was necessary to justify the continued existence of fully-functioning state organs despite their stated communist goals. And why was this justification necessary? Because the whole point of communism has always been to attain a classless and *stateless* society: to get rid of any forms of social differentiation based on the division of labor and *all forms of government* whatsoever. This is one point where I disagree with communists, though I laud their ideals; this is also where I think the line between socialism and communism can be most clearly drawn. Groups of both socialists and communists will differ on the details of their ideologies—and these differences have been the cause of split after split among their groups, greatly weakening the entire leftist movement—but to me the essential point to keep in mind is that whereas a socialist may see a continued need for a governing body and a role for that body in society, a communist wishes ultimately to remove it entirely; to see the state wither away, to use a historically popular communist phrase. As I believe I've told you, my own heart is with the socialists; I'll speak in much more detail about the form I think government should take tomorrow, but for now let's dwell on this distinction a little while longer. To me the crucial matter here is that socialists tend to view government—and its accompanying prowess for organization—as a tool to be exploited, as a means for improving the current societal condition through a fairer running of things generally and especially through a fairer distribution of the nation's wealth. Communists, on the other hand, tend to see

government essentially as an enemy, as a generator of corruption and a perpetuator of an unequal balance of power. They seek the equality of all members of society through first upsetting the current balance—or rather, reversing it so that today’s have-nots wrest power from the haves—and then instituting a series of changes that are intended to eventually eliminate every asymmetry found in that society; to make everyone equal in every respect. These are changes that will require generations, of course, and hence communist governments have so far functioned—definitionally, at least—as socialist governments. Some have made greater efforts than others towards an eventual elimination of government—of themselves—but the world has yet to see a society functioning in a truly communistic fashion, with the possible exception of the much celebrated and short-lived Paris Commune. But even there a ruling council of sorts was formed; what balanced it was the high degree of politicization of average Parisians that the commune achieved. Much more could be said on this matter but not without taking us far off our current course. What I would instead like to stress here is that although communist governments have run themselves as socialist governments, to some degree the highly committed retained their ideology of a governing body as being essentially detrimental—that is, something that the true believers wanted to get rid of but the self-serving wanted to exploit; Mao Zedong spoke extensively of the bourgeois element within communist parties and governments themselves. A government run by socialists and for the purpose of socialism, on the other hand, does not need to espouse an ideal of government being an inherently negative institution; its ideology requires neither any plans nor any desire to dissipate it. Rather, socialists usually take the stance that a government can accomplish much good in society and that it should be run for the maximum benefit of all *in perpetuity*. Equality in society can be achieved even in the presence of an imbalance of power, of one group ruling

over another—that is, the existence of a functioning government. I believe that these two very different approaches, these very different viewpoints, are crucially important and that the resulting distinction between socialism and communism must therefore never be blurred, never be forgotten, and the two must most definitely never be equated.

That said, what can history teach us about the application of alternative forms of government? To speak in modern terms about alternative governance is necessarily to speak about governing from one of these two positions—from socialism or communism—since even in those countries where ruined consumerist ‘democracies’ don’t exist the governments are still run from the right: military governments, theocracies, dictatorships, and the like. What, then, can we take from the failures—and in many cases, the atrocities—of the twentieth century left? Can any of those ideas be salvaged, or must they be viewed as lost causes, as wrecked philosophies, as the dreams of sentimentalists—or even as the creations of evil men and women? To the modern Western mind, communism has unfortunately become equated with a small number of men who ruled in its name, and the horrors that have become synonymous with some of them. Compounded to this is the error that communism equals socialism, and vice versa. For our discussion here I think it’s safe to omit North Korea and its ruling family from our consideration; what has occurred there has been the establishment of a bizarre dynastic fiefdom, and were the situation not so tragic it would no doubt be quite fascinating. Of the men whom we now associate most with communism, Joseph Stalin probably stands out even more to the average person than Karl Marx or Friedrich Engels. Stalin was, by nearly all accounts, a tyrant pure and simple; it is extremely doubtful that he acted out of communist motivations any more than Genghis Khan did. His legacy is one of unthinkable brutality; he created such extreme

suffering that people are still dealing with it in some places. Conversely, Mao Zedong appears to have been a very devout communist; the Chinese Cultural Revolution—that we have erroneously been taught as being led by him, or started by him—was, in his mind, just one of many revolutions that would need to take place to ready the Chinese people for a transition to a true communistic society and a stateless nation. He encouraged it at times, suppressed it at others, turned a generally blind eye to its riots and street fights, and even seems sometimes to have cheered them on—but he did not direct the multitude of groups, associations, councils, communes, et cetera that sprang up during those turbulent years. What he did do, however, was to successfully use it to regain supremacy in the Chinese Communist Party and oust the rivals that he thought wanted to return China to a capitalist system. That those rivals then took control following Mao's death, and did indeed lead China back to capitalism, tells us that perhaps Mao's judgment of them was accurate; though this in no way condones his tolerance of the Cultural Revolution's excesses or his comfort with violence generally. Likewise Fidel Castro and Ho Chi Minh were men who struggled and struggled to free their homelands from imperialism—overt or not—and improve the lives of their fellow citizens; yet we are presented with images of them as heartless killers and enemies of freedom. If these men—Stalin and the Kims excluded—were truly interested in creating more just societies, why was such cruelty done in their names? I believe the key to this lies in how their power was gained: states created out of violence will always breed more violence, and if your goal is to eliminate government by first violently seizing it, then it follows that violence will continue as that path too is pursued. My objections to communism are based in this acceptance of violence as a political means and its view that government is something that must be gotten rid of. Socialism, and the great socialists of history, does not share this enormous black

mark though mistakes have been made, and in my mind it is crucial that modern socialists reject violence in all its forms. We must use government to create better societies, to reshape our nations into ones that are just and fair for all; this can be achieved through nonviolent means and sustained by responsible government. Leaving these men aside then, and focusing on the nations themselves and the attempts made at re-building their societies—for these so-called communist states did function as socialist ones, as discussed—what can we learn from their failures and how can we avoid such failures in the future? First and foremost is the lesson that socialism *can* be adopted in isolation; a worldwide system is not required for its implementation or its sustenance. I'm no expert, and you should certainly seek out clear voices that are more knowledgeable than mine, but it seems to me that the Soviet Union's eventual collapse was caused mainly by economic pressures brought about by its pursuit of super-power status and a global leadership role. Had resources been better allocated, and the absurd military build-up it pursued avoided, its leadership may have been able to provide its people with the kinds of lives and society they sought by having a revolution in the first place. Moreover, had decisions been made collectively within the circles of leadership, and better trade ties maintained—particularly with China, whom they tried to coerce into following a set Soviet line with economic pressure—history may well have turned out very differently. On this note of trade, if a socialist country does exist in isolation, how is it to survive in a hostile capitalist world? Here I think we can use post-war Japan as a model. Its government, while remaining fiercely capitalist of course, enacted policies that focused on attaining a high level of national income from exports and then using that income to fuel domestic social programs aimed at raising everyone's standard of living. For many years the gap between the rich and poor in Japan was tiny by Western capitalist standards; such a system, harnessed by a socialist government for

socialist purposes, strikes me as having great potential for success. In the case that the government of a nation like the United States tries to bully the newly-founded socialist country into submission by a trade embargo, measures may have to be taken and hard decisions made, but both the people of the U.S. and the country suffering under its embargo should be made aware that the only real winners in such a circumstance are the wealthy and elite Americans who pushed for the embargo to be adopted; the average people in both nations have nothing to gain and much to lose from such a policy. So a socialist country can exist independently, and economic options for it are available; what about the societies themselves? This is another area where we have seen grave mistakes made. There is nothing in either socialism or communism that says a government needs to spy on its people or restrict them in significant ways; in fact, both ideologies are very expressive in their goals of equal and free societies. Presumably the post-revolution governments that were formed were keenly aware of the continued threats they faced and their resulting precarious positions, and instituted such internal espionage programs to handle them and secure their holds on power; their continued existence, however, must be seen for what it was, and in some places still is: a great injustice. The equal ownership in the means of production, service, and innovation, and the equalizing of the benefits garnered from them through the redistribution of wealth and extensive social programs do not necessitate the restriction of personal freedoms. These principles are the very backbones of both socialism and communism; the ideas themselves are sound; where leaders have gone astray has been in their implementation. And this is the final area where we can take a very valuable lesson from the experiences of the twentieth century: the need for quality leadership. I believe what can best assure this is to have an extensive training program for future leaders, to limit the time in power of current leaders while still giving them a place in

government, and to require that all decisions on policy be made collectively without any one person having a final say in the matter currently under consideration. We have seen deep levels of corruption in socialist governments, men and women striving for power and then doing anything to keep it for as long as possible, and tremendous abuse of the power gained. By limiting terms in office but still giving our leaders important positions within government we can remove any potential impetus they may have to try and maintain their current position. What's more, by requiring final authority in state decisions to rest with a group rather than one person, we can eliminate the ambition for a supreme post that drives people to the kinds of desperation that history has demonstrated. The ideals of socialism and communism are beautiful and humane, just and fair for all; we should not abandon them because of the mistakes that have been made in their names, but rather learn from those errors and strive to get things right. A socialist nation can exist on its own, its economy can be run well and can grow, and its society can be open and free; what it requires, in my opinion, is a rejection of the games of international power and a focus on domestic issues, a refusal to use violence as a tool both in gaining power and in keeping it, and a leadership structure that is extremely carefully planned. Alternative governance is possible, and to that end the lessons from our past are well worth considering.”

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This was the only talk in my whole collection that the Teacher prefaced by saying it'd be part of a series, so of course it really got my attention. And right at the time my wife was hassling me with almost hourly calls to help her choose a new paint color for the kitchen. How did she expect me to choose between jonquil and

Naples yellow only from the photos of the color swatches that she sent to my phone? Ahh, the trials of everyday life.

Anyway, what really hits me as the paramount issues here are the distorted views we have of history (because we're only taught one side), and the propagandistic value this has on how we see the modern world. History of course affects everything in our viewpoints, and when we hold a false history in our minds we are much more likely to judge our current situations askew. That is, we don't know what to make of what's happening now without a balanced knowledge of where we've come from. Undoubtedly there were many, many terrible things done by these leftist leaders in the past, and the few countries that are socialist today have had to make major changes, but that doesn't mean that the ideas themselves are faulty or deserve to be dismissed off-hand. I think that especially in times like these, we really should consider all our options.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *leftist politics, lessons from the past, past failures* | *4 comments*

Freedom99 says:

Posted 07/20/2011 at 06:24pm

Don't you think it's telling that every discussion of leftist politics has to start with some kind of long-winded apology? If the ideas espoused by leftist thinkers had any merit at all then by now we would've seen some of them succeed. Even hard-core countries like Cuba are opening up to the free market, both externally and internally, because that's the only way economies can grow. And if communism and socialism don't require secret police and

oppression, then why do all the countries that became communist or socialist still have them years after their revolutions?

As I keep saying, the facts show that a good government is one that's limited as much as possible. You don't need to make excuses for that. Long live libertarianism! Let's give *that* a try!

BobReynolds says:

Posted 07/20/2011 at 07:38pm

No matter how you slice it, those men the Teacher mentioned were terrible murderers. What does that say about them and the ideas they held? Nothing good if you ask me. I'm damn proud that we whupped their asses.

Lucyssky says:

Posted 07/20/2011 at 09:10pm

These are important points that will fall on almost entirely deaf ears. How can we approach such ideas in a new way? In a way that won't immediately offend their hearers? I don't have an answer for that, but I wish I did, because we really need to come to terms with our past and find a better way forward.

SusieCue says:

Posted 07/21/2011 at 11:43am

Back in the '70s I had a little Chairman Mao pin that I used to wear around. I'm fairly embarrassed by that now.

## **On control socialism**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 07/27/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“No one likes to hear the word ‘control’. We have been conditioned to value freedom and choice more highly than anything else in society and taught that we have abundant freedom and choice in our lives. As I have repeatedly addressed, we are not in fact free; we are slaves to an economic order that is based on a constant cycle of purchase and discard, buy up and toss out—in short, based on waste and the constant generation of waste. This system has come about through a complicated network of individuals enriching themselves at the expense of others, and then acting in groups when it suits them to keep their riches intact and the sources of their revenue open. They do not act in unison; there is no ghost bourgeois mentality controlling every single wealthy person who has prioritized profit above everything else in their lives. What instead exists is a concerted effort by the wealthy and

powerful to maintain the status quo as it clearly is most beneficial for them; and when it suits such people they will form partnerships with each other and then dissolve them immediately when a new partnership becomes potentially more advantageous. As such, it is easy to see them always operating *en masse* rather than as a multiplicity of individuals who are merely out for themselves. We have suffered through years of these conditions, and in modern times our ‘cultures’ have been saturated with this kind of thinking, with these values—*their* thinking, *their* values—to such absurd levels that we have all swallowed this tripe as the only possible way to live. What else is there but representative democracy based on an über-capitalist model? And we call this freedom! We have been blinded to the fact that our democracies are puppet regimes that only serve the wealthy—that are only *meant* to serve the wealthy. We dutifully cast our votes every so often and choose between a list of candidates that are equally soiled in dirty money and favors owed to the already-powerful and then convince ourselves that we have somehow chosen our government based on the ‘will of the people’. Who of the people could ever even dream to have the resources to run for an elected office? The system is a sham, a disgrace, a *lie*. Then, after having done our ‘civic duty’ with clear consciences, we head to the grocery store and are confronted with twenty-seven different kinds of cereal. There’s your freedom of choice! What garbage will you put into your body tomorrow morning? Later tonight? No, we are not free and the choices we’re given to make are meaningless—so much for the cardinal values of a consumerist society. What I am proposing, instead, is that we relinquish the *illusion* of freedom and make ourselves actually free—free from the farce that is now imposed on us. That we live in a society that is run for the benefit of all *by those most fit to run it*, and not by those who are of the wealthy and only serve the wealthy. I propose to enrich all of our lives by *handing over* control of all government functions to a small

council of our best and brightest, who will not be party members striving for power and political advantage, for ways to repay favors done and indebted others with favors to them, but who will instead be naturally gifted administrators that have undergone a unique and extensive training to prepare them for the job of their lifetimes—but one that will only last for ten years.

Allow me to expound. The key to my hypothesis of control socialism is the education system. I believe I have already spelled out my ideas for how our schools should be structured, based on a program of first discovering each individual's talents and then placing them into a progressively specialized track that is designed to accentuate their strengths and prepare them for a career in the field most naturally suited to them. Among the population of future scientists, athletes, artists, social workers, teachers, managers, builders, landscapers, musicians, lawyers, so on and so forth, there will also be those gifted in administration, in organizational skills, in policy development and enactment. These are the people that will be singled out for government service. They will train their whole lives to perform the highest roles of public service—under a constitution that ensures that such service is actually *public* and not merely plutocratic—for a period of ten years, no more but less should circumstances warrant it. These people, the best and brightest of each generation, will then rotate into and out of a high council, as temporary members of the small body of decision-makers but permanent members of the overall government. Here is the structure: Government consists of a single small body of men and women, say, the same number as exists now for ministerial posts. You have one member in charge of the economy, one in charge of the environment, one in charge of transportation and infrastructure, one in charge of education, one in charge of research and the sciences, et cetera. For simplicity's sake, let's say that the entire group consists of ten people. All of the members of

government not currently serving as one of the ten in the high council will serve as an advisor in their respective sub-field—be it economics, the environment, education, what have you. When the current member of that sub-field’s term in the high council has come to an end, they will be replaced by one of their advisors and will themselves again become an advisor. The order for such replacements will be done on a basis of seniority—the advisor who has served as such longest will next ascend to the council for their ten-year term; unless they prove to be incompetent and then can be fired from the council and returned to the role of advisor by a unanimous vote of the other members of the high council. In such a way those not in power will rotate into power and then rotate out of it. Everyone involved will have been trained their entire lives for the sake of those ten years and will have a perfect understanding of their duties, privileges, and limitations via the education they have received. Since there are no political parties and no jostling for an executive post—for one does not exist, all members of the council hold equal levels of authority—and furthermore strict and irreplaceable term limits, power struggles within this administrative group will be either completely absent or of a nature so reduced from the current mess we are now burdened with that they will seem non-existent by comparison. All decisions made by the council must be unanimous, regardless of the decision and the jurisdiction it falls under. In matters of economics, for instance, the economic specialist’s vote will carry no more weight than anyone else’s. Her voice may carry further in the debates on the issue to be decided, but that is to be expected—after all, such a person has been trained in economics their whole life and naturally has a much deeper understanding of it than those trained in other areas. This aspect too, one vote for one member, will further help to ensure a lack of power struggles within the council and their circle of advisors. Each member of government, upon reaching the age of mandatory retirement, will then quit public life altogether just as

any ordinary worker quits the place that has employed them. Their opinions on matters could of course be sought, but their role in the public sphere will be forever ended. So we have our council, our small group that runs the country and whose say is final. They create ideas for new laws, or reforms to existing laws, and then must achieve a unanimous vote to enact them, with debate continuing until that point is achieved or until the measure is dropped. But what of the central executive? The chief of the so-called village? And what about the masses of legislators, the parliamentary houses? Away with them! They are completely unnecessary in such a system; the high council acts as both the executive branch and the legislative. And no one person will stand above any other member of the council, there will be no room for a dictator to emerge for three reasons: the national constitution will strictly forbid it, there will be term limits without exception, and each member of the council will have undergone years of training to prepare them for their job—training that would have discovered and rooted out tendencies towards megalomania or, failing that, ejected the student from the track of government service and replaced them in another track that has nothing to do with running the country. You're wondering about the court system, the judicial branch. That, I believe, can remain as it is now, based on a judge, a prosecutorial and defense lawyer—all also government employees, as everyone will be, and all also trained specifically for their roles—and a jury of peers. That system is a fair one and can run even smoother than it already does once everyone—the general public from whom the jury will be drawn—has received a better education than they currently get and been stripped of the prejudicial and racist tendencies that sadly color so many judgments made now. In summation, the government has three layers: the high council serving their terms, the advisors assisting the high council members and waiting for their turns to serve or having completed their terms of service, and those students still in

training for their lives in public administration. This is also of course reflected at each subsequent level of organization beneath the national: there are state, provincial, territorial, county or prefectural high councils, city high councils, and any others that may be necessary, each also staffed by students tracked separately through the education system to fulfill these roles. Supporting all this will be a bureaucracy composed of the ordinarily-gifted—the office workers who do not mind such labors. I know that some nations now stock their bureaucracies with highly-intelligent and able people, but that is a mistake, I think, for such people will quickly get bored with the nature of the work and are better suited elsewhere.

The twin pillars of a society run by control socialism will be wisdom and compassion, and that is why an economic system of socialism and the equal distribution of wealth is such an important element; only socialism treats every member of society as an equal human being—not equally abled, mind you, but equally *valuable*—and only socialism can ensure that such equal valuation is equally rewarded. There will be many against such changes, and naturally the opposition will mainly be composed of those with the most to lose by being stripped of their inordinate privileges and wealth, but pay no attention to them. Theirs is the shrill scream of the propaganda machine that tells us that we too can make it, can join their elite ranks, all the while rigging everything they can get their hands on to make sure that we *stay down*, that we shut up and *keep buying*. They do not act in accord, but each acting to amass and hoard as much as possible makes for a formidable army of individuals, and the net result is largely what it would be if they did always act together. That we see some actually rise into this group, by the way, is not proof that their system works, on the contrary, it is proof that there are still exploitable holes in the system—but such examples are forgiven by the powerful and the

wealthy for they can be used as excellent fodder for the endless proclamations of their system being ‘fair’ and ‘free’ and ‘just’. Only socialism can rectify this situation and create conditions that are truly fair for all; and by placing the running of the country in the hands of those most capable to do so—and then *leaving them to it*—we ordinary people can free ourselves from the burden of politics. Oh, our opinions will still matter greatly, and undoubtedly the members of our high councils will wish to hear from the public frequently via polls, referendums, and other data gathering techniques to inform them of what policies to pursue, but we will be able to focus on our jobs and our lives without being constantly distracted by the three-ring circus that now dominates our news programs and media outlets. This politician said this to that other, this minister released news of that’s sex scandal, this member of the upper house changed her vote and backstabbed another—really, who cares? It is all illusory anyway, we are not in charge and we do not benefit from the antics done in ‘our name’. So we free ourselves from all that and focus on our lives, on our families, on our careers and circle of friends, in a society that values each of us as being equally worthy and that places us in a position where we can find the most happiness and fulfillment in life. We will have a government run by a small group of people that nature has gifted with extraordinary abilities and that our education system has gifted with extraordinary heart. Wisdom and compassion, based on an extensive training in humanistic philosophy and mindfulness meditation. They will be taught to truly respect and love the population they serve, and they will be mentally disciplined through their meditative training—an invaluable tool in making rational decisions even under great emotional duress. We will be led by our betters for the sake of all, and our control socialism will require no maintenance on our part to keep it running, that is all built into the education system and administrative structure. We will finally have a government that actually *serves*, and that is

composed of those who are the most gifted and most moral in our society.”

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This got us all abuzz. I remember discussing the Great Teacher’s ideas about his “control socialism” far into the night while the stars whirled above us. I can really see the advantages to it, especially in reducing, or even eliminating, corruption. It would also give us a much higher standard of leaders, and not just a string of people who can win elections but not actually govern. And it would get a lot more done. No more squabbling over stupid pork-barrel ideas shoved into bills on issues not at all related to what some lawmaker had to stick in to repay a favor to a hefty donor. We’d also have a real direction to go in and could get rid of all the half-starts and back-and-forth that happens now when one guy undoes what the last guy did only to have the next guy try and re-do it. What would we lose? Just the false-hope democracy we have, and let’s face it, only about half of us vote anyway.

I’ll admit that I had my doubts when the Teacher spoke about the problems with democracy. I already posted those [above](#) (just follow that link). But when I re-listened to this talk as I typed it out, somehow it all clicked for me, and I can now see the logic behind it. Oh, in the meantime I’d rather live with the democracy we already have even if it’s a terrible system that really does only benefit the rich. I mean, it beats living under a dictator or military junta or something. But that’s only in the meantime. I’d love to live in a society run like what the Teacher says here, and I wouldn’t mind socialism one bit. A lot more taxes and less take home pay? An easy trade-off for the endless benefits I’d get in healthcare, retirement, public transportation, job security, education for me and my kids, and on and on and on. If you really

try and balance the costs and benefits I think you'll also see that it's worth it, and this type of socialism sounds like the best option out there. How to get it? Well, as I've said, the Great Teacher detested all forms of violence so you can forget about manning barricades with a rifle. But you don't have to forget about revolution, as long as it's a peaceful one.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *control socialism, governance, government structure* | *4 comments*

Freedom99 says:

Posted 07/27/2011 at 08:45pm

Okay, I'll admit that I can see how this system would have its advantages, but another form of socialism? That's the Teacher's big idea? Come on! That dead horse has been beat to a pulp! What if the high council were to vote itself in forever? What would happen to science and technology? Would there be a free market? What if there isn't? Too many questions!

Lucyssky says:

Posted 07/27/2011 at 09:37pm

I'd like to hear some more details, and it sounds like Freedom99 would too, but so far I like what I've read. I think that people would be a lot happier under this system, especially when combined with the Teacher's work program that you already outlined where everyone is put in the position that best suits them.

BobReynolds says:

Posted 07/28/2011 at 06:10am

Well sir, some of this sounds like it'd work, but the constitution would have to be as solid as a brick to keep people from trying to take too much power for themselves.

Loopyloo says:

Posted 07/30/2011 at 02:04pm

I'm actually intrigued by this...

## **On government's reach and its limits**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published: 08/03/2011*

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“I wanted to pick up where I left off yesterday. I have given you my vision of control socialism in a broad outline, details of the structure of how such a government will be run, and the advantages to such a system, but I have not laid out just what the role of government will be in a control socialistic society, and that is what I aim to do today. And I use ‘will’ rather than ‘would’, by the way, because this vision for a better world burns inside me; it is not a mere conjecture, a mere wish for an alternative to the disgraceful state of affairs we have now, it is an idea that demands to be discussed, experimented upon, and implemented in as many circumstances as possible to refine and perfect it, to polish it to such a degree that it becomes universalizable and, when applied, is capable of building the kind of human society that we all deserve: one that is compassionate, patient, tolerant, and filled with love

and respect for all its members. Let me begin, then, with a few generalities. First and foremost, understand that taxes will necessarily be very high but still progressive in nature. Our schooling will discover our innate talents and place us in tracks where those abilities will be developed to a high degree, and, once completed, we will then be placed into a career most fitting for us by the government based on the training already received and the sub-field we've chosen. This job placement will be a natural extension of the education system, and as some will receive much more education than others—again, based on their innate abilities—it is fitting that pay too differs accordingly. Everyone is equally valued, but not equally gifted, and those whose jobs require much more training will therefore be compensated at a slightly higher rate. This may not appear fair on the face of it, but it does address the natural unbalances of life and, furthermore, since everyone will be in the field most suited to them and have the same government services available to all, there is actually very little room for dissatisfaction to creep in. This is the basis for a progressive tax system, that those who do receive higher pay will also be taxed at higher rates, and those receiving lower pay will be taxed less—thus providing further equilibrium to society generally; that is to say, those who have more will have only moderately more, and those who have less will have only moderately less. Government income from taxes will then be used to fund the government's considerable duties. All organs of production and distribution in the economy will be locally managed by the workers of each place of employment but owned by the state; indeed, everyone will be an employee of the state, or, to put it in a more positive phrasing, everyone will do their job knowing that all profits are being redistributed throughout society for the benefit of all. Government is the ultimate organizer, and therefore is best able to ensure the proper functioning of all social services by also having all aspects of economic ownership under its jurisdiction.

Let's say, for example, that you have just finished studying to be an architect and receive an email from the job placement service informing you of what firm you'll be working at, where that firm is located, and when you should report for your first day. Excited to begin, you dutifully show up at the designated place and time, meet your colleagues and learn the management system that they themselves have decided on—no longer dictated from above—work a normal day, and then go home at quitting time—just as we're all used to doing. The only real difference here is that your firm is not owned by an individual seeking to maximize his profit, but by the nation at large, by the government—as is every other firm, factory, restaurant, café, supermarket, shop, what have you. Corollary to this complete ownership of the economy, the government also provides all social services such as health care, transportation, environmental management, et cetera, with each likewise managed by its workers. You do not need to worry about finding a health care provider to join, qualifying for their insurance, and then making monthly payments. Every single person is automatically a member of the national health care, and can use its services for free as their personal needs dictate, a system much like the one already in place in some countries. Want to go somewhere? Just head to your local station or bus stop and board one of the trains or buses as you would already do. They too will be free of charge, paid for through your taxes, owned by the country but operated locally by the workers in a manner of their choosing. Want to go see a film, live theater, concert, or visit a museum? These will also be free for all to enjoy, and the artists, actors, musicians, producers, curators, guides, and others involved in their production and management will be employees of the government just like you and I are. These naturally creative people will have also gone through the education system to hone their skills and upon graduation will be sponsored by the nation—by you and me and everyone in society—and will be provided with ample

opportunities to display their works for the public to enjoy; we are their sponsors after all, and they are co-sponsors of each other too through the taxes they pay. Some may wonder here whether this wouldn't lead to drunken and slovenly so-called artists leeching off of everyone else, but on the contrary I imagine that such a system will actually see a tremendous increase in the creative output of such gifted artisans; for people are not naturally lazy, just often misplaced. Knowing that their works will have a guaranteed public showing will be a tremendous motivator to those naturally drawn to art in all its forms, a motivator that enhances the self-drive already in place from being paid to do what you love and are good at. Parks and nature reserves will be ample, run and cared for by public employees, and once again free for all to enjoy. In fact, only those things that involve an element of personal choice will need to be paid for, with entertainment an exception here as already mentioned. What I mean by involving an element of personal choice are those areas where preferences come into play. For instance, take the issue of housing. As control socialism takes root in a society and people are taught to change their thinking and reject the consumerist values they have been trained to laud, purely equal—by which I mean of the same type—housing may be possible for all, but in the meantime we have people living in all kinds of different homes and with all kinds of different trappings. Those who wish to live in larger or more ideally located—for whatever reason—homes will need to pay more for them, and those with humbler tastes will be able to pay less, with all rates set by the government. All homes will also be owned by the country at large, and rather than paying rent to a landlord or mortgage to a bank you will instead make your monthly payments to the state, deductible from your paycheck as all taxes are. Upon reaching retirement no more payments will need to be made and you can continue living in your home for as long as you like, or move into another home based on availability, also without the further need

to pay rent. Should you wish to pass your home on to your children that is of course possible, but your children will need to pay the set rent until they also retire from their jobs. Since the rate of rent due per domicile is set by the government, as the owner, a natural equaling of the homes we all have will be able to be achieved. Gigantic mansions built out of all proportions to the needs of their inhabitants will be gotten rid of, but those who wish for larger homes will be able to live in them; again, the rule of thumb will be that those who have more will have moderately more, and those who have less will have moderately less, but everyone will be able to afford a home as everyone's wages will also be set by the government—and they will be livable wages. In such a way, the inequalities that exist now with the widely varied types of homes we have can be managed while still allowing for personal choice among individuals—we will not all have to live in concrete boxes hurriedly constructed, as some capitalist propaganda would have us believe. New homes that are built, however, will need to be done so according to the decisions made by the related high council—be it at the city, state, or national level. For example, they may wish to require that all new homes are of a certain size, meet local environmental concerns, have solar panels on their roofs, have a yard or garden attached in some way, et cetera. Also in this area, that is, the area of personal choice, is private transportation. Should you desire your own car, motorcycle, or other mode of transit, you can of course buy it, and the requirements for each—environmental or otherwise—will also be decided by the high council. Food, drinks, books, magazines, clothing, things of this nature will also need to be separately bought; but again, since all modes of production are owned by the government—and therefore owned collectively by all of us—whatever money we do spend goes to help pay for everything that we enjoy free, and if we decide not to pay for anything at all aside from food, we will still be contributing to the system via the taxes we pay from our work and

will of course be able to enjoy all the services available. Everyone will have a job provided by the state and everyone will be able to make use of all that the state has to offer. A minimum standard of living will be guaranteed in this way, and even that minimum standard will be very high when compared with the situation we have today where a tiny minority have lives of unbelievable luxury, a majority have lives of a decent standard but that are filled with worry and uncertainty, and a growing minority have lives of absolute misery. These gross inequalities can be addressed in a manner that still allows for differences in preference among individuals—particularly where individuals wish to make decisions based on personal lifestyles—but that treats all members of society as being equally valuable and equally worthy of respect and love, allowing each person to find happiness and fulfillment in their lives.

It is in the regard of personal lifestyle generally that we find the limits of government's reach. What you do with your free time is entirely your business—control socialism will not control to that extent! All aspects of your social and personal life will naturally be up to you, and some very important parts of this will be freedom of speech and expression, pursuing interests not related to your work, and your interactions with friends and lovers. Control socialism is *not* about thought control, it *is* about training minds to be compassionate, to be tolerant, to be accepting, loving, respectful, and wise. It is about creating a global consciousness in each person, making all of us aware of the role we play in the larger global community, and behaving in ways that are ethically compatible with that awareness. Along these lines the freedom of the Internet must be guarded, people must be able to express themselves in whatever manner they choose to online, and as our educations improve no doubt we will see much less of the childish spats between strangers that so many public forums now display. With

this freedom of expression comes the freedom to post, publish, print, or broadcast in a small media format—completely free of government intervention. You can create whatever kind of website, small newspaper, leaflet, poster, book, small magazine, music file, speech file, et cetera that you or you and some associates would like to. Mass media, on the other hand, will be owned by the government and as such will be subject to the controls placed upon it by the high council. This may alarm some, but I would ask them to consider: how free is our mass media now? Is it not owned by large corporate conglomerates? Does it not therefore report in such a way so as to not only avoid damage to its owners but also to promote its owners' interests? Is it not motivated by profit and therefore pursuing stories that it believes will *sell copies*, regardless of the quality of the content or its newsworthiness? Has this not led to a remarkable degree of sensationalism in the press? Who of us really trusts what we read now? A truly objective press is impossible under a system that is profit-driven; for there will always be an influence either from the moneyed interests that support the publications, or the need to create profit by reporting in a panic-inciting manner in order to induce people into buying their products—to shock us into providing them with sales. Seen in this light a government-controlled press is by far a more responsible news outlet, particularly when those running that government have been trained their whole lives to execute decisions based on what is truly best for all society. This press, the nation's press, will provide accurate and balanced information and, when necessary, withhold information for the greater good as deemed by the high council. Say that an environmental disaster is likely but not yet inevitable, what good would reporting on what *might happen* accomplish? Rather wait until either the crisis has been avoided and report on the steps taken to avoid it, or, in the unfortunate instance that the crisis does occur, report on what actually did happen and the steps that need to be taken to deal with it. A

controlled mass media *does not equal* an absence of freedom of speech; it equals an absence of influence from sources other than the government. Some may feel that this is a very dangerous introduction—look at how the Soviet Union handled the Chernobyl disaster, for instance. I would counter that in that case the government of the Soviet Union was most certainly not acting in the interests of the people; it was acting in its own interests to cover its own mistakes and try to maintain a situation that the government thought it could control *for its own ends*. This is not to say that the Soviet government at the time was run by purely evil men and women—just to say that ultimately their decisions were not based on the safety of the people directly affected by the disaster. Under control socialism the high council in charge of making such decisions will be composed of society's brightest and most moral individuals, thoroughly trained in humanistic ethics and endowed with the mental discipline that comes from a regiment of mindfulness meditation—theirs will be rational minds filled with compassion and wisdom, completely trustworthy and under no pressure to protect themselves personally as they will be working under strict term limits and furthermore aware that once they stop being a member of the high council they will still be involved in leadership as an advisor to a member of the high council. In essence, government will take care of the necessities of life, and decisions on the personal level will be left up to each individual to make for themselves. In this way, with state providence and personal liberty working in tandem, our lives will be far better than they are today. We will no longer be victims of companies' constant need to sell—regardless of the quality or necessity of their products—we will no longer be burdened with a political system that is more of a celebrity sideshow than anything else, nor will we suffer under a government that is run by the rich for the rich. We will have our jobs guaranteed and will be placed in them based on our talents and enjoyments; we will have a network

of social supports that includes, but is not limited to, healthcare, education, housing, transportation, and recreation. We will be able to focus on things that really matter to us, whatever they may be, and our responsibilities in such a system will simply be to go to work and pay our taxes—two things that we all already do anyway. Those of us who adopt control socialism—we in the first generation—will be able to enjoy the services newly available, but will likely have to keep laboring at the jobs we already have. Those without jobs will be tested for natural abilities and then placed accordingly, and those wishing to change jobs will also be able to apply for the testing and a re-placement; but it will be our children that will really benefit, for they will be able to enter our new education system and be trained for their future careers in ways that are already beyond us adults. We will build for our children's future, and an important part of that, a crucial part of that, will be the lessening of the emphasis on materialism—the cardinal virtue of the consumerist society that says to amass as much as you can at the expense of others, all the while having to constantly buy and dispose of all of the things that you don't really need. We must free ourselves of this by teaching our children to move away from an attachment to *things* and towards a valuation of all people and other living creatures as being worthy of endless love and respect. We in the vanguard must believe in our vision of a better society, a brighter future, and we must *know* that regardless of the form our emancipation takes, be it control socialism or another, it is an idea worth living for.”

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I remember this talk well because it was one of the times that we all happened to be staying in a hotel and it was my turn to pay. At first I was pretty upset at having to shell out for everybody's room (we took a vote early on and agreed not to share rooms even

though it meant bigger hotel bills), but after the Teacher delivered this lecture while we had our after-dinner coffees and teas, I felt immensely proud of my contribution. And I think that's the way it is with people. Basically it's in our nature to want to help each other, but we've all been trained to be so selfish that now the very idea of paying for someone grates on us. It's ridiculous, the way we worship money. I'm sure that a society run by control socialism would help cure us of that, and future generations would probably be completely cured. This came right on the back of Ogden's explanation of control socialism (the link's [here](#), last week's post), and the way he explained how it would work seemed to more or less win over any doubters that remained. Well, among those of us still following him, anyway.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *control socialism, government services, personal liberties* | *5 comments*

BobReynolds says:

Posted 08/03/2011 at 02:10pm

No house payments for us retirees? Sounds pretty damn good sir, I've got to say. Not sure about paying higher taxes though, but then I guess I wouldn't pay any as I no longer work. And come to think of it, I don't mind sticking my kids with that bill one bit!

Captainjack says:

Posted 08/03/2011 at 05:51pm

could you like write in smaller paragraphs and shorter sentences it's hard to read sometimes

Freedom99 says:

Posted 08/03/2011 at 10:36pm

I'm sorry but I just can't get over paying taxes for things like healthcare and transportation. I'd rather walk than take a city bus.

Loopyloo says:

Posted 08/04/2011 at 12:39pm

I'm sold! What do I do now?

Lucyssky says:

Posted 08/04/2011 at 04:07pm

Basically what the Teacher's advocating here is an increase in government services paid for by higher taxes, and then with the reforms to the education system young people will be placed in the jobs suited to them and the new system will really take effect, if I understand this correctly. Even with the changes in government and economic structure I can't see any major effect on my lifestyle, I could just keep working and living my life. Of course, I'd have a lot more services to enjoy, but it doesn't sound like it'd require much of me, and the change in mindset we'd all be working toward strikes me as one I'd welcome.

## **On being content**

By JOHN THE BAPTISED | *Published:* 08/10/2011

*The following is the true story of Ogden Prounrow, the Great Teacher, the man who left us with nothing but his philosophy. Quotes, where given, are direct and word for word. In my time following him I recorded every word he spoke with a portable mp3 player and later categorized the files by topic and date. Comments are welcome, as is discussion; the Great Teacher had much to say but to my mind could sometimes have said it clearer. Opinions, analysis, and/or commentaries, where given, are my own and I take full responsibility for them. Lecture dates are not provided as I chose my own order of presentation when compiling the content for this blog, and anyway the Great Teacher rarely spoke in a linear fashion. It is my hope that these pages will be a place of learning and growth for a world sorely in need of what the Great Teacher had to say. Best wishes—John.*

“A quiet mind is a content mind. You have all put your lives on pause to come and be with me, to follow me as I meander. We have walked many, many roads together, and I have heard you spend many a long evening deep in conversation, mulling over great things and re-building the entire world in your minds. You have seen much and sharpened your thinking; you have become diamond-tough. I am very impressed. But what happens when you go back to your routines? When you return home, greet your families, rest and enjoy yourselves, and then wake up the next morning facing the prospect of work? Of a day in the office with your colleagues who haven’t changed one bit? Who haven’t had the experiences you’ve had, who haven’t challenged themselves to grow in the way you have, who haven’t tried to see the world in the way that *it could be*, who are stuck in the cycle of endless

shopping and letting life wash over them, who won't even make a peep of protest at our tired, stricken, and decaying cultures, trapped as our societies are in the grip of the great profit machine, spewing out the just-like-corpses of the still breathing but hollow drones that toil with nothing to live for but their next purchase. How will you approach them? How will you speak with them? How will you be with them? That is the key, and that is what I have for you today—to simply *be*.

We all need to learn to still our minds. We have so many things running through our brains every moment of every day—things we need to do, things we want to do, things we'd like to say, things we wished we'd said, memories, plans, desires. It's a wonder we can ever do anything! And it is so easy to become obsessed by these things, to turn them over and over in our minds as we pick apart what happened to us, who said what and when, who did such and such and can you believe it? On top of all this we lay our endless plans; scheduling every moment of every day with minds so stuck in either the past or the future that if our breathing weren't automatic we'd suffocate from our lack of focus. This is the condition we're all in; this is how your family, your friends, your co-workers will be when you return to them, for they cannot but be otherwise. And how can you avoid falling back into the same old habits? Through a sustained effort to be in the moment that's supported by a regular practice of mindfulness meditation. I'm no expert, and you should certainly seek out wiser and more practiced teachers than me, but I can give you some basic advice on keeping at such mental training. The crucial point, the fulcrum of the whole process, is to observe. Focus your mind on what is happening now, what you are sensing now, what you are doing now; as much as possible—and it will be very difficult for a long time—do not let your mind wander away into what is not, or get so carried away into what is going on that you lose your focus on observing.

Conversation provides an excellent example here. Most people when engaged in speaking with someone, and particularly if engaged in speaking with someone about a topic they find very interesting, get involved in what they are saying and what is being said to such a depth that they no longer realize they are speaking at all—their mental energy is absorbed *in the act* and not *aware of the act*. Quite simply, they forget themselves. This of course also happens in hundreds of other little ways through the day: while folding clothes, brushing one's teeth, or doing anything that by habit has become somewhat automatic, our minds wander away into planning or recalling or fantasizing. I'm not advising you to stop talking, or doing your household chores, or keeping up your personal hygiene; what I am advising you to do is to do these things with your mind actually *on them*. When folding your clothes, focus on that. When brushing your teeth, focus on that. When engaged in conversation—and this is a tricky one—speak with a mind aware that you are speaking. This, in some ways, means taking a slight step back so as not to get lost in what you're saying. Keep conversing normally, naturally, but with just enough mental distance that you stay out of the rabbit's hole. If you're no longer aware of what else is happening in the room, or the circumstances of your environment, you've probably lost your focus. This will happen all the time, so just remind yourself to keep observing, to keep being aware, and every time you bring your mind back to the moment your concentration will get a little bit better, your clarity of mind will increase just a smidgen. Keep at this and over time you will notice remarkable results. Your mind will become more settled; you will be better equipped to make rational decisions even when in the grip of a strong emotion; your intuition will improve and you'll learn how to trust it; things will naturally fall into place for you; you will feel more content and less worried, less stressed about the future and all of its unknowns; you will naturally become wiser and more compassionate. All this by simply observing. In

short, keep your mind in what you're doing now, be conscious of your senses, notice your breath, feel your feet when walking and your hands when working, keep your mind about you and in the world as it is now—focus your mental life. In our modern world with all of its conveniences this has gotten much more difficult to do, and as such is probably more important now than ever. Consider this for a moment: When you get an email—and there are dozens of ways we can now be instantly alerted to the arrival of an email—what are you thinking about as you read it? Are you actually *reading* the content or simply processing it on one level while you automatically begin composing your reply? What if that email interrupted something you were already doing? Do you drop what you were just thinking about and write your response in your head? Or do you finish what you were doing and then get to the email? Or a combination of the two—read the mail, get back to what you were doing, and while doing that original task part of your mind is working out what you'll reply? There are thousands of ways for us to become distracted, and so I'm proposing that instead we stay in the moment, for that is how we can live our lives as they actually happen.

The core of what I have been trying to teach you this whole time is to love and respect one another, universally, without prejudice or preference. Each and every one of us deserves endless amounts of love, respect, and compassion. Remember that people are good at heart, but that we are all victims of our cultures and the experiences we have had. We are social creatures—hyper-social, really—and want to help each other out, to have good relations with those around us, and to work together for the better of all. Unfortunately, many of these very admirable *human* traits have been trampled under the feet of our modern consumerist cultures; we have been trained to think otherwise than our nature would have us think; we have been taught to distrust one another and to

expect evil not only from strangers but even from the ones closest to us. We are stuck in a sad state of affairs, but we can break out of this cycle. We can unlearn the warped teachings of our money-means-all cultures and create new ways of relating to each other, new ways of viewing our lives and the lives of others, new ways of *being*. We can fix what has been broken—quite easily—and it starts with all of us beginning where it's needed most: ourselves. Adjust your priorities to put others ahead of your own desires, to be thoughtful; don't view those around you as rivals or potential sources of trouble, but rather as co-travelers on this world of ours, and as those willing to lend a helping hand. If someone is angry with you, rather than returning the anger or lecturing them on their behavior, try to think of reasons why they may be so upset—if you can imagine at least one, perhaps instead of anger yourself you'll begin to feel some compassion for them. And even if you feel that you are in the right be the first to apologize, if only to defuse the situation. Being right is a very small thing but strife with others isn't. Try to change your thinking about the world in the ways I've described; life can be a grand journey and is so very worth living as it occurs, not with our heads in the past or the future or fixated on some imagined afterlife. Focus on the world currently around you, be observant as much as you can, and keep a mind for helping others, to making your own little circle a better place. The fact of the matter is that we don't know the burdens others are carrying, that others have had to deal with their whole lives. We all have those issues; we all have things in our pasts that we would have had otherwise, and things about ourselves now that we would also change if we could. Each and every one of us suffers, and suffers deeply, and to help alleviate that we can be of great benefit to one another. Trust and follow your intuition in this, you will soon see just how much you can do, even if it only amounts to a few kind words a day. Once you've started down this path, and find yourself feeling more compassionate towards others and having a more

positive view of those in your life, try and extend those same feelings out to all living creatures as well, for they too suffer and have lives that are more difficult than they need be—and largely because of the things we humans do to them and to the environment that we share. It will not be easy making these changes, keeping up the mental discipline it requires and the effort it will take to act in ways less selfish; indeed, it will be a life-long process and won't really end for any of us until we've reached our final days on this beautiful home of ours spinning through space. But it will be so worth it for the kinds of societies we can build, the kinds of lives we can lead and the gifts of happiness and fulfillment that we can all find for ourselves and give to each other. Start with yourself, then your family, your friends, others in an ever-widening circle, and finally out to all living creatures and the living planet itself. This too is possible; we only have to start trying.”

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And that was it. This was the last lecture he gave us. The next morning we woke up and the Great Teacher, Ogden Prounrow, had finally done it. He had ditched us, so to speak. But that puts a very negative spin on things so let me instead put it this way: He had given us all that we needed and then disappeared. We tried following him. We even made a few impromptu search parties and spent the whole morning looking high and low, but there was no sign of him.

After we met back at our campsite of the night before and had a big lunch together, one or two of us (I can't remember exactly who) suggested that maybe he didn't want to be found. That he knew what he was doing this whole time and previously had only pretended to try and leave without us. Those words struck home

for me, and I realized that they were my feelings too. We said goodbye then and each of us went back to our lives. Some traveled the road together for a little while longer if they lived close to each other, while others made the long or short journey home alone. I myself walked with Young Tom for some time, and we agreed to try and keep in touch. But after I got back to things and started searching for a new job (I now have very satisfying work at an environmental NPO) and helping my always patient wife out around the house, it just never seemed to happen. I hope that he, and maybe some of the others too, will see this blog someday and we can re-connect. The Teacher had a lot to say, and I'd sure like to talk things over with them again. And of course also with any of you, dear netizen readers. The comment boxes will always be open.

Posted in *Teachings* | Tagged *building better societies, contentment, helping others* | *5 comments*

Captainjack says:

Posted 08/10/2011 at 6:20pm

is this the last one man bumper!

SusieCue says:

Posted 08/10/2011 at 8:12pm

So that's it? I want more!

Freedom99 says:

Posted 08/10/2011 at 9:49pm

Well, I didn't agree with his politics *at all*, but I guess the Teacher's life stuff was pretty good. Now I'll have to find some other website to read and post on.

Lucyssky says:

Posted 08/10/2011 at 10:04pm

I know how you all feel, but the Teacher gave us a lot to think about. We should be grateful for that and keep the discussion alive.

BobReynolds says:

Posted 08/11/2011 at 6:34am

I thank you for all the time you put into this, good sir. It must have been a damn pain in the ass typing all of these talks out. But from where I stand, even disagreeing with him as much as I did, the Teacher was all right. I hope he's still wandering around out there someplace. It's nice to think that old farts like him and me still have something to give this world.

*Notes, comments, and suggestions for further reading*

A few words about *Tomorrow, as the Crow Flies*: This is a book that I've wanted to write for years and years, probably the better part of a decade. For most of that time it was simply a goal, something that still needed to be worked up to, but then over the past two years I began to seriously attempt the project. I wanted it to be approachable enough for a general reader, not a technical book or a work of rigid academic scholarship; what I wanted most of all was simply to share my thoughts and stimulate thoughts in others, and nothing would please me more than to learn that my book had got people talking about the very important issues covered here. I struggled to find a format for this, and even abandoned the book in an entirely different form about one third of the way through the first draft (not, as many writers will know, an uncommon event). When the idea to write it as if it were a blog occurred to me it felt very much like a eureka moment.

The book is of course experimental in both its form and content. Not really a standard work of nonfiction, yet not a work of fiction either, it blends both in a way that is perhaps best paralleled by Friedrich Nietzsche's wonderful *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and hence the nod to the great philosopher on the back flap here. The format I have chosen is meant to make the book more approachable, and the added narrative to give it an element of fun, though I naturally leave judgments on both those aspects up to the reader to decide. In the following pages, added about a year after the book's first publication to try to clarify and expand on some of the points left slightly vague by the overall structure, I make some brief comments on the general topic or specificities of the content of each chapter, along with a few suggestions about where readers who may want more could go next. Whether you bought, borrowed,

or pieced this book together from various Internet sources, I thank you very much for reading.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Oberg  
Tokyo, Japan, August 2012

## Chapter 1: On the absence of a soul

The idea of the absence of a soul is a very old one and will no doubt strike many readers as being quite self-evident. For those interested in exploring the topic from a spiritual perspective, almost any book on the general tenets of Buddhism will have a chapter discussing its teachings on no-soul; personally I find Zen Buddhism the most appealing of that religion's many branches, and would recommend Alan Watts' *The Way of Zen* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999) for those with similar preferences. Those who wish to explore the topic from a secular point of view will find Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008) an enlightening and thoroughly educating read. There are of course many other sources a reader could consult on this issue as well.

Further reading on Descartes' idea of the pineal gland being the seat of the soul can be found online in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, its "Descartes and the Pineal Gland" article is here: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pineal-gland/>.

## Chapter 2: On human nature

Humankind doesn't seem to have taken the current negative view of itself that many of its members hold until the advent of Christianity and the notion of "the fall" or "original sin". It is my view that although there are of course people who, for one reason or another, be it a medical condition, mental imbalance from the way they were raised, or something else, do not share the common traits of decency, openness, and a willingness to help, those are nevertheless the underlying attitudes with which the vast majority of us approach each other. We are all, generally speaking, good eggs. Some may object here that wishing something doesn't

necessarily make it so (that is, wishing that people are inherently good doesn't make them good), but the same rebuttal could be used in its opposite form just as easily (assuming that people are inherently bad doesn't make them bad).

The argument is a difficult one to carry in contemporary settings, however, as there will always be people who will simply refuse to accept the evidence offered, and point instead to instances of crime, greed, and vice. To them I would pose the question: All religious beliefs about the nature of humans aside, do you think you would have a more pleasant life if you saw those around you as simply others seeking personal happiness in their own way, or as others actively seeking to harm you as soon as an opportunity to do so presented itself? All things being equal, I am very much in favor of giving each other the benefit of the doubt. For readers who are interested in a psychological approach to this issue, via the wisdom of ancient religious and philosophical traditions, I offer Jonathan Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) as a good starting point.

### **Chapter 3: On consumerism**

There are a great many books, articles, documentaries, etc. on the dangers of consumerism and the rapacious devouring of resources that it entails, and the reader will already be familiar with many of these. Its defenders will sometimes say that consumerism is necessary because it is one of the primary engines driving global capitalism; to me, that is simply one more reason it has to go. Many in my generation had the emptiness of the consumerism we were taught to participate in and uphold forcefully brought home via *Fight Club* (the film first probably, and then Chuck Palahniuk's novel (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) later) and its memorable

line, “The things you own end up owning you.” Rather than suggest further reading on this issue, I would challenge the reader to instead look inside, because what this comes down to is a question of values. What is most important in life? What kind of condition do we wish to leave the planet in for our children and our children’s children? And can we justify lives of vast extravagance while one-fifth of humanity lives in what the World Bank defines as absolute poverty? (On that last point, see the “Absolute Poverty” section of the *a Dollar a Day: finding solutions to poverty* website: [http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/00282/over\\_what.is.htm](http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/00282/over_what.is.htm).)

#### **Chapter 4: On the pitfalls of democracy**

This is no doubt one of the most controversial chapters in the book. To be absolutely clear, I do not think that democracy works and that the time to try another system of governance has long since come. In addition to the problems with democracy highlighted here, we can add its necessary short-sightedness, made abundantly clear by our world leaders consistently failing to agree on, let alone achieve, measures that will adequately deal with the enormous problem of human caused global warming. Elected officials are not willing to sacrifice their careers for the sake of a better future by making the necessary, but potentially unpopular, policy changes for fear that such would lead to their failure to be re-elected; while that may be an understandable position from a certain point of view, the fact that the governmental system we employ encourages and sustains (even rewards) such a stance must be seen as a major fault.

On the issue of government output and legitimacy, Bo Rothstein’s paper “Creating Political Legitimacy: Electoral Democracy Versus Quality of Government” (*American Behavioral Scientist* 53 (2009): 311-330) illuminates the topic extremely well and makes

many intriguing points, though Rothstein himself remains committed to democratic government. Of particular interest here he notes that studies of the meeting of political opinions between representatives and the majority of the electorate produced lower figures than a lottery would have done in Sweden, Germany, France, and the US, that Swedish citizens have more confidence in appointed leaders like doctors or judges than in elected ones, and that the “will of the people” is notoriously hard to determine. Readers with a special interest in Indian history may likewise find the third installment of Perry Anderson’s recent series in the *London Review of Books* (“After Nehru.” *London Review of Books* 34 no. 15 (2012): 21-36) relevant, where, in a comparison of the Chinese and Indian models, Anderson writes that the Chinese government is “accepted by the masses for the material benefits it takes great care to deliver them, however unequally. Whereas in India, democracy allows just the opposite – an input legitimacy from the holding of free elections, that thereby excuses the political class from distributing more than confetti to the masses who have elected them.” (p. 33) I do not mean to praise the Chinese Communist Party here (nor, I’m sure, did Anderson), I rather want us to talk about the elephant in the room—democracy does not do what it purports to, it is not a system of rule that benefits anywhere near a majority of the people.

## **Chapter 5: On the nature of truth**

I use the term “truth” in this chapter in the sense of “accurate knowledge”, as readers will have naturally noticed that I do not accept any supernatural or outside source of so-called revealed or ultimate truth. The issue is an epistemological one, and the position taken here very much empirical, though I do agree with the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) that we should always accept a degree of doubt in our claims to knowledge, and

remain open to making whatever adjustments are found to be necessary. There is a great deal of work on this topic in the fields of philosophy and cognitive science, among others, and though it is often technical and rather difficult to penetrate, a dedicated reader's perseverance will likely be rewarded. I find Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) and Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970) to be two good examples (one extremely well-known, the other less so) of writers whose works on this issue are difficult but worth the effort, particularly in how they frame the complex relationship between language and knowledge.

## **Chapter 6: On issues of personal identity and community**

As a person who has spent most of their adult years living abroad, I have long been interested in questions of identity and belonging: where we would place ourselves and how we would like to be seen by others. Of course, as an expatriate in a highly homogeneous society, I quite visibly stand out from those around me and have gotten used to (though not accepted) having to deal with certain typical assumptions that many people make about me when they see my face. These include not only how I make my living, but also my nationality, political ideas, religion, views on certain social issues, dietary habits, etc.; all pegs for people to fill their mental slots with and keep their outlook clean and simple. We are all, however, much more complex than the way we tend to see each other, and that is one of the concerns expressed here. Regarding the issue of community in particular, and the dangers of a strict in-group/out-group, us vs. them worldview, see Claudia Koonz's *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005) for an excellent and in-depth history of the social conditions in Germany prior to the start of the war and the way that the Nazis were able to very effectively alter public morality and cement the view that members of the out-group were not worthy of the same (or indeed,

any of the) moral considerations as those of the in-group. I also plan to write extensively on in/out-group thinking as a primary cause of violence in the near future.

## **Chapter 7: On reforms to the education system**

This chapter builds on some of the issues introduced in the preceding chapter regarding personal identity and career choice, and highlights the important role that an education system has in building a society. Some may be tempted to dismiss the ideas presented here as simply one more version of tracking, yet what such a proposed system would entail would go beyond tracking as it has traditionally been defined by being more specifically field focused, by adding elements of ability grouping (a term that is often erroneously used as a synonym for tracking) and interest grouping, and by being fitted into an overarching universal employment program (see “On government’s reach and its limits” (Chapter 18) in the present volume). Personal choice remains an important element of the education system described here, but the overall design is meant to highlight children’s strengths and encourage them to excel at what they can do and enjoy doing. The system offered is, to my knowledge at least, more or less unique, but interested readers may want to pursue the ongoing debate about traditional tracking in the relevant academic journals.

## **Chapter 8: On the emerging global culture, its potential, and the ethics it requires**

Let’s face it: we have no idea where the present Internet Age is taking us. But we can look at some general trends and try to figure out the best way to deal with what may well happen. Just over a year ago (February 10, 2011) Lev Grossman’s fascinating article for *TIME Magazine* about some of Raymond Kurzweil’s ideas

along those lines called “2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal” was published (available here: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2048299,00.html>); the astute reader may note its influence on parts of this chapter). There is also, of course, the Zeitgeist Movement (<http://www.thezeitgeistmovement.com/>) which has its own program for a more just and sustainable future, yet it remains simply one of the more well-known of many groups with suggestions and plans for how to proceed. This, I believe, is an excellent sign; we should keep all of our cards on the table and our options wide open, but we should also begin discussing with much more earnestness ways to use the Internet’s potential to foster a sense of ethical universalism and to promote ideals and values that are humanist without being speciesist. Global inequalities in Internet access and other problems associated with technology distribution are also issues that, in my opinion, need to be addressed with some urgency.

## **Chapter 9: On sex and sexuality**

To be honest, this was a chapter that I didn’t particularly want to write. Peter Singer in his *Practical Ethics* (now in its third edition; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) pointedly does not discuss sex and even includes a section in the first chapter titled “Ethics is not Primarily About Sex”. While that is certainly true, the sad fact of the matter is that there are still far too many people with anti-gay, anti-bi, and anti-transgender prejudices, as the recent nonsense in the United States with the fast-food chain Chick-Fil-A and its public stance against same-sex marriages has demonstrated. (For the story and the mayor of Boston’s letter to the company, see the *Huffington Post* article of July 25, 2012, “Boston Mayor’s Letter to Chick-Fil-A President: Anti-Gay Stance is ‘Insult’ to City” here: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/25/thomas-menino->

[boston-mayor-chick-fil-a-letter\\_n\\_1703770.html](#).) There is no rational reason why same-sex couples should not be able to marry in the United States or anywhere else, and the supposed morality behind such bans needs to be seen as a product of the same unsupportable prejudice as prohibitions against miscegenation and racial segregation were. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people should have exactly the same legal rights and protections as every other citizen, and there is a strong case to be made for programs such as affirmative action (those unfamiliar with the rocky road this has taken in the U.S. may find the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article “Affirmative Action” to be helpful: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/affirmative-action/>) being applied to their groups as well as to racial minorities and women in an effort to provide some small measure of recompense for the terrible suffering these individuals have had to endure. Such an application of affirmative action programs would be difficult to initiate and even harder to properly manage, but the idea is not without merit. (One example of a management issue involved would be that unlike with racial minorities and women, LGBT individuals are not noticeable at a glance, how then would proof of status be provided? Would documentation of past activities suffice? When I applied for a spousal visa here, the Japanese immigration authorities required a dated photograph of my wife and me establishing the longevity of our relationship, but such a measure seems fraught with potential problems.)

The issue of equal rights is also, again unfortunately, tied in not just with sexual identity but also with sexual practices in some parts of the world. An Ugandan politician, David Bahati, recently re-introduced an anti-homosexual bill to the parliament there, where even in its new “softer” version it calls for prison sentences to be given to individuals for homosexual acts (as *The Guardian* reported on February 8, 2012, in its article “Uganda anti-gay bill

resurrected in parliament”: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/08/uganda-gay-death-sentence-bill>). Sexual prejudices of this kind should really have been overcome long ago; it is high time for all of us to move on and simply see one another as equals, each pursuing our own happiness in our own ways.

## **Chapter 10: On living in the present**

Mindfulness has become somewhat trendy of late, and the interested reader will be able to find a great many resources on it. The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has written a practical and helpful guide, *The Miracle of Mindfulness* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), in addition to many other books on the topic. Jonathan Haidt also covers the practice briefly in his *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* mentioned above (New York: Basic Books, 2006). In addition, there are a number of websites offering free downloadable (or streaming) audio lectures on mindfulness practice, the one I’m most familiar with is: <http://www.zencast.org/>. For readers interested in mindfulness but not in Zen a simple Internet search will reveal many other sources from websites as diverse as [www.oprah.com](http://www.oprah.com) to [www.swedish.org](http://www.swedish.org).

## **Chapter 11: On living with yourself and others**

This chapter again deals with mindfulness, but in the specific sense of sitting in silence in daily meditation and the remarkable way this simple practice can help change the way we look at life and each other. The resources referred to above (Chapter 10) will be applicable here too, and there are likely at least a few groups, religious and nonreligious, in the reader’s area for those looking to participate in group sittings. Of course, any kind of meditation can

be done on one's own as well. My only advice, and I am certainly no expert, would be to keep at it every day, even if for only five minutes, and to try and still your mind by focusing on your breathing or a notable bodily sensation (for example, a pain or itch) without moving for however long a time you've set yourself. When you notice that you're lost in thought, just bring your focus back to your breathing. This type of meditation doesn't involve the chanting of mantras or visualization of a deity, and one can be quite nonreligious (or irreligious even) and still benefit from the practice.

Incidentally, Tim Parks has just published a book about his experience with Vipassana meditation, *Teach Us to Sit Still: A Skeptic's Search for Health and Healing* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Books, 2011), and a novel about a young woman volunteer at a Vipassana retreat center called *The Server* (London: Harvill Secker, 2012). I haven't read either, but both seem like they could be a fun introduction to the practice of Vipassana.

## **Chapter 12: On the taking of life**

As far as I'm aware, the approach taken in this chapter, especially to the killing of nonhuman animals, is unique and, if so, would make the argument a fresh contribution to the wider discussion. There are many books on the issue of animal rights, most notably Peter Singer's classic *Animal Liberation* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2009 (2<sup>nd</sup> edn)), and many others that explore human relationships with nonhuman animals, such as Tony Milligan's *Beyond Animal Rights* (London: Continuum, 2010; I find Milligan's emphasis on sustainability in his book to be particularly compelling), but the focus here on the harm that we do ourselves by harming others is, I think, an important one. Some may view the stance that I have taken as being open to accusations

of speciesism as it addresses the topic from a singularly human point of view, but to my mind this approach is likely to be more broadly acceptable than previous ones have been, and when viewed in context such an allegation would be seen to be unsupportable.

The act of killing may not always harm the killer psychologically (for example, someone smashing a spider on the floor), but the infliction of suffering does as it contributes to a mindset that is primed to do violence to others, human or not. If we can begin to train ourselves to treat nonhuman animals in far more humane ways, then I believe that we will also begin to treat each other in far more humane ways. This is a compelling reason to examine our attitudes towards killing, violence, and what it is to be alive and to hold a set of interests and desires. On that last point, readers will again find Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011 (3<sup>rd</sup> edn)) instructive and thought provoking.

### **Chapter 13: On core values**

Whether or not one accepts the values proposed in this chapter, what I think is of utmost importance is that we begin to critically examine the values we currently hold in the light of the kind of society we'd like to live in. Claudia Koonz, in her *The Nazi Conscience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2005) referred to above, chronicles how the Nazis were able to change the way most people thought by building on pre-existing anti-Semitism, giving their racial program an academic veneer through the collaboration of some scientists, professors, and legal experts, and saturating the public with books, magazines, films, documentaries, and pamphlets. All of these methods for influencing public opinion are still employed by governments and organizations the world over, and the lesson we should take from Germany's experience during

those twelve years is the danger in simply accepting what we're told—even if, and especially if, we've been told those things over and over again since childhood.

Take the attitude towards gun laws in the United States. That country has suffered from repeated and indiscriminate mass killings, as I write this there have been two in the past month (one at a showing of the new *Batman* film on July 20, and one at a Sikh temple on August 5; see the BBC's "Obama calls for 'soul searching' after Wisconsin attack" of August 7, 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-19158203>), yet rather than becoming more restrictive over the years, gun laws have in fact gotten looser, with many states now allowing anyone to legally carry a concealed firearm. (More than you probably want to know about walking around with a hidden gun in the U.S. here: <https://www.usconcealedcarry.com/>.) It seems unbelievable, but these laws reflect a common, taken for granted, attitude that part of being safe involves the ability to arm oneself, and to carry that arm with you anywhere and at any time. That such a value is a major contributor to the gun-related crimes in the country is usually dismissed by gun rights activists with the reasoning that if a criminal wanted to get a gun they would, and so therefore law-abiding citizens need to be able to legally have firearms too. Whether or not one accepts that reasoning as sound, broader attitudes towards public safety, personal liberties, and the law do not seem to be very deeply examined by many in the U.S. due, I think, to the value of governmental noninterference that most are raised to support. Americans may in fact prefer a society where everyone is armed and arguments are settled with bullets in the way that Westerns depict, but if so that needs to be a choice consciously made and not one arrived at by default.

## Chapter 14: On ownership and letting go

Readers looking for more on breaking, or at least reducing, an attachment to the things in their lives will be able to find much helpful advice available from a number of sources. One interesting article that I stumbled across on why it is sometimes very difficult for us to throw things out, along with some tricks on beating the natural bias involved, is Tom Stafford's "Why we love to hoard... and how you can overcome it", posted July 17, 2012, and available here: <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20120717-why-we-love-to-hoard?selectorSection=health>.

## **Chapter 15: On thinking for yourself**

Asking why, analyzing chains of events, and arriving at one's own conclusions has become all the more important in the present media-soaked age, particularly in the context of the West's "war on terror" and the mixed messages we are fed on the dangers of violent Islamic fundamentalism and Islam's fundamental message of peace. Our leaders are careful to frame the threats we are supposedly facing from all corners in ways that are specific enough to give us nagging doubts about the slightly Arabic-looking man sitting next to us on a flight, but vague enough to also have us welcome constant surveillance and support massive increases in military spending while public services are cut across the board. We are kept in a state of constant fear, but the threats are always from "others", and motivated not by the decades of economic oppression, looting of natural resources, and propping up of puppet regimes that the people involved have suffered through, but by the mysterious tenants of their faith—oh, no wait, by the mysterious tenants of certain extremist groups within their faith. As the public atmosphere involved in this open-ended "war on terror" has certain parallels with that of the Cold War, readers may find Hannah

Arendt's *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970) instructive, particularly the first section.

George W. Bush took a lot of flak for his supposed “The terrorists hate us for our freedom” statement (actually conflated from a series of statements taken from his speech of September 20, 2001: “Americans are asking ‘Why do they hate us?’ They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.” The full text is available here: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress\\_092001.html/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/bushaddress_092001.html/)), but in fairness that speech was produced by a team of speech writers and he was hardly alone among Western leaders in simplifying the conflict and seeking a reason to go to actual war. The lies, corruption, pillaging, murder, torture, human rights abuses, and all of the other deplorable things that have occurred since the attacks of September 11 have been well-documented and do not need to be rehashed here. What needs to be stressed is simply that if a way out is ever to be found it will come from all of us cooling and clearing our heads, and then putting them together in the absence of moneyed interests to arrive at a way forward.

## **Chapter 16: On past failures and what they can teach us**

The contents of this chapter are probably more prone to misunderstanding than others, so let me be clear in stating that it is not meant as a defense of either the Chinese Communist Party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, or any of either party's leaders. What it is meant as instead is a way to clear the air and approach the past from a fresh perspective, without all the usual prejudices that especially those of us who were raised in Western

countries during the Cold War tend to possess. The countries that experimented with alternative governmental and economic systems during the 20<sup>th</sup> century did achieve some successes, and the lives of many of their people did greatly improve, but there were also many mistakes made and avoidable tragedies occurred all too often. The paths of those countries that are continuing the experiments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are likewise potholed, though Cuba's move towards term limits for its leaders is a healthy sign (see "Cuba: Communist Party Agrees To Term Limits" in the *Eurasia Review* of February 12, 2012: <http://www.eurasiareview.com/12022012-cuba-communist-party-agrees-to-term-limits/>), while China's continuing embrace of neoliberal economic policies is less heartening. The less said about North Korea the better, certainly, and the discussion does not need to be overly complicated here with issues regarding Vietnam, Laos, or even Venezuela.

Specifically regarding Joseph Stalin and his policies, Slavoj Žižek suggests in his *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Picador, 2008) that the now opened Soviet archives show a Stalin who may actually have been a true believer, and that the citizens of the U.S.S.R. might have been better off had he been the cynic almost everyone takes him for. I do not feel qualified to comment on the issue any further than to say that I think his actions speak for themselves regardless of whatever motivations may or may not have been behind them. Readers interested in learning about Mao Zedong and his place in China's Cultural Revolution from a different perspective will find Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (New York: Verso, 2010) intriguing; I also found its sections on the Paris Commune and the events of May 1968 quite captivating.

## Chapter 17: On control socialism

This chapter presents another unique contribution to the wider discussion, and is also no doubt prone to generating controversy. I leave judgments on its merit entirely open to the reader, but would like to point out that what is outlined here is simply that—an outline, a beginning, the seeds of an idea that would greatly benefit from the input of others. The influence of previous political thought can be seen in this system, for instance the importance of small groups of experts, the division of roles within those groups, a hierarchy of leadership bodies leaving local issues to the locals, etc., much of which can be seen to have antecedents in aspects of Plato's *Republic*, a book that remains strikingly original and important. (The version I read was Allan Bloom's translation, titled *The Republic of Plato*; New York: Basic Books, 1991 (2<sup>nd</sup> edn)) I have taken care to maintain a structural focus on government as a provider of services and distributor of wealth, with no notion, even at the theoretical level, of its dissolution, which I believe was a lasting negative influence on the thought of those on the left who made previous efforts at alternative governance stemming from a desire to fulfill a utopian version of communism. This is not a defense of the 20<sup>th</sup> century systems of socialist governance, but rather an attempt to learn from them and from our experiences with liberal democratic governments to try something new. What is one of the great tragedies of our time is that no one seems to believe that things could be other than they are; history did not end in the early 1990s (as is sometimes proclaimed by proponents of the capitalist neoliberal systems), we are still making it and can make it anew.

The reader will note that there is almost no discussion of economic concerns here. I do not feel qualified enough to discuss economics except to note that history seems to teach us that a command

economy does not work, that some measure of private enterprise will always be a necessary part of human societies (barring some unforeseen development in the evolution of our psyches), and that some individuals will naturally be able to manipulate such a system to maximize their own profits. None of this should concern us, however. What we are after is the most just, beneficial, and sustainable society that we can build, and the governmental structure offered here is meant to help move us towards that.

### **Chapter 18: On government's reach and its limits**

The focus of a society with a control socialist government would remain on the individual. Such a government would not have the transformation of humanity as its goal but rather the maximization of individual fulfillment, each member of society would have a place in the greater whole and would know that place, having been thoroughly educated and trained to do best what comes most naturally to them and where their interests most heavily lay. A system such as this is entirely in keeping with the principle of equal consideration of interests that Peter Singer explains so well (see his *Practical Ethics*; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011 (3<sup>rd</sup> edn)).

The transition to a society like the one envisioned here would have to be gradual. In particular, the moves towards an equality of condition would need to be introduced slowly so as to avoid either a brain drain in which those who are currently highly paid emigrate to places where they could maintain a high level of pay, or the necessary enforcement of travel restrictions in an attempt to prevent emigration. A couple of points remain in the control socialist's favor, however; one being that there is quite a lot of room to play with in the salary ranges of professionals under the current system, and adjustments allowing for a more equitable

distribution of wealth could be enacted while still paying such people relatively highly, and another is that nearly everyone involved in presently highly paid work would want to continue what they do because they enjoy it. If a lawyer's salary approaches that of her local supermarket manager, she is not likely to suddenly want to become a supermarket manager, after all. Moreover, once the benefits of the system begin to show themselves, especially, I think, the increase in public services and enjoyments available to all, and the system's goal of maximizing individual fulfillment is understood and accepted, opposition to the changes slowly taking place would most probably be very light.

### **Chapter 19: On being content**

Finding contentment is one of those things that nearly everyone on the planet struggles with on a regular basis. What are presented here are simply some small ideas, and readers will no doubt have many of their own. If I may be so bold, I would like to suggest that perhaps a move away from a focus on purely personal and short-term goals towards one of contributing to others, and the building of structures to support such a view, may be helpful along with the proposals found in the chapter in improving everyone's daily life at least a little.

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