

EXPENSIVE THINGS: FULL-BODIED PRECONCEPTIONS

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“There is nothing so expensive, really, as a big, well-developed, full-bodied preconception.”

So wrote E. B. White, in his 1942 essay having to do with purchasing a cow to graze on his small farm in Maine at the edge of the ocean. White had lived in New York City for many years and was a columnist for *The New Yorker*. He continued to write for the magazine from afar, even though, upon moving, he had been admonished by a friend, “‘I trust,’ he said with an ugly leer, ‘that you will spare your reading public your little adventures in contentment.’”

Perhaps the author did spare the urbanites most of his rural-inspired thoughts, but not all. He noted the rest in his journals, which were later collected and published under the title, *One Man’s Meat*. There is no sparing in those pages. Instead, the greenhorn farmer recorded countless details about his attempts at raising chickens, selling eggs, making compost and fertilizing the grass for his sheep, mending fences, seeing a rare bird, fixing tools, and relating to the neighbors, as well. In other words, he wrote about life. There’s plenty of meat in those pages, but if I had found just my opening quotation, above (which was tightly embedded in an essay all about other things, such as clearing cow pastures by dynamiting boulders), it would have been reason enough to have read the book. This is because a preconception, a pre-conceived idea, is anything but a *rara avis*, a so-called rare bird. Instead, such things abound wherever and whenever and among whomever, including you and me. (And, yes, as with the assumption that not wearing a mask or a seat-belt won’t kill you, they can be costly, indeed.)

John von Neumann was one of the foremost mathematicians of the 20th century. He published some 150 papers, the majority on pure mathematics and worked on, among other things, Quantum theory, the Manhattan project that built the first atomic bomb, and prototype computers at the Institute of Advanced Studies at Princeton University. Julian Bigelow, an electrical engineer has told of his interview for a job on the computer project, driving to meet the great man at his home in Princeton. Upon his arrival, he noted a large dog romping on the lawn, and as von Neumann opened the door to let Bigelow in, the dog ran into the house and started sniffing everything in sight, as dogs usually do. Intent upon their discussions, neither of the two paid much attention to the canine antics, but finally von Neumann asked Bigelow if he always traveled with his dog. Bigelow’s reply: “It’s not my dog --I thought it was yours!”

Presuppositions: we all have them, all the time. Some of them get cleared up, while many do not. (The story is related by Jon Casti in his provocative book, *Paradigms Lost: Tackling the Unanswered Mysteries of Modern Science*.)

Among the issues addressed in this essay is the underlying racism of the horrendous fact of slavery: human beings possessing –as in property-- other human beings. Slavery has been part of our history from the remote past, and, even today, it has not completely disappeared. In spite of our usually considering the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome to be among the more enlightened ones, slavery was a dominant feature from their earliest beginnings.

It is something of a marvel that the lives of three of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Western World overlapped as teachers and students in the Greek city of Athens. First, there was Socrates, who had no personal ambitions, except the discovery of truth. He prowled the streets of the city, a relentless inquisitor, always asking questions about the good life and how to attain it. His affirmation was that “The unexamined life is not worth living,” and he put his own life –and that of others-- under the proverbial microscope. “O, gods,” he said, in the marketplace, “who would have dreamed there are so many things I do *not* want?” (Imagine him in his tunic at Macy’s or Home Depot.) He asked, “You, my friend --a citizen of the great and wise city of Athens—are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the great improvement of the soul, which you never regard or heed at all?” Socrates stated flatly, “I am too honest to be a politician and live.”

Eventually, the opposition coalesced and put him on trial for disturbing the city’s tranquility, being an atheist (he was not, to abundant evidence), and “corrupting the youth.” He could easily have saved himself; he did not. At his trial, in his *Apology*, or “defense” –one of the great documents in Western literature-- he said, “If I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, I am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God. The state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly ...and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. You will not easily find another like me, and therefore, I would advise you to spare me.” For his impertinence, he was sentenced, not to hard labor, or solitary confinement, but to death. Thus, he drank the poison Hemlock, convinced that no evil, ultimately, that is, can happen to a good person in life or in death.

There are parallels with Christ, who was seen as dangerous to both the religious and secular establishments and crucified for not keeping his mouth shut, as well as for preaching about an entirely different set of values. He spoke of a kingdom not made with hands, wherein the pearl of great price is not material and the things most real in life have to do with the heart. He spoke of values such as faith and hope, and that, because we are loved, we are called to love, not only and abstractly, God, but also to love our neighbor as ourselves. Christ himself wrote nothing,

but his words and actions have moved the world, because they live on in the record of the Gospels and in the hearts and minds of followers the world over. In at least a somewhat similar manner, the words of Socrates were memorized and amplified by a disciple, in his case, Plato, who wrote dialogues filled with his master pursuing a razor-sharp Q & A method of inquiry to expose deeply held assumptions, which are often the main motivators of thought and action.

Plato gave us the term philosophy, meaning “love of wisdom.” He went on to create his own sort of philosophy, one of the world’s greatest, emphasizing pure reason as the tool to separate the illusory from the real. His conclusion was that ideas and Ideals are of more worth and substance than material things, that they exist in the pure realm of the mind of God, and that they deserve our attention over the transitory elements of this world. Form precedes function, Plato said. For example, the *Idea* of a tower exists in the mind of the architect prior to its construction and is more important, more lasting, than the stones or bricks of which it is composed. When the building has crumbled, the idea or the Form remains. Saint Augustine, another intellectual giant of several centuries later, became a Platonist. Platonic presuppositions underlie much of the history of Western philosophy, especially those of the school that we call Rationalism, to which such names as Descartes and Leibnitz are attached (it is no accident that they were also great mathematicians, too, inventing calculus); Spinoza is also of this tradition.

One of the students at Plato’s Academy was the young Aristotle, who joined at age seventeen. He would go on to establish his own school, emphasizing that the best route to truth was not, in fact, pure reason and reflection, as Plato had held, but observation, i. e. he was an empiricist. It is sometimes said that people are born either Platonists or Aristotelians: that, in every age, some follow the principle of working things out by strict reasoning via abstract principles, while others follow the route of actually examining specific things in detail in order to draw conclusions. Aristotle made many mistakes, but, for his time, his approach was fruitful, and it is still much in accord with the cool and balanced approach of science. In this respect, even after twenty-four centuries, we look back and recognize a “modern” when we see him.

Aristotle wrote on all sorts of subjects, from “town planning,” organizing the human community into villages, cities, and states, to the complexity of living organisms of various types (e g. the development of the chick in the egg, the reproduction of sharks and rays, and humans). He described the habits of bees and the principal parts of the human body --and the rainbow. He wondered why some objects move down, while others move up, and puzzled over what happens in the evaporation of water. He pondered how to classify the overwhelming variety found in the world around us, and came up with categories. He discoursed about friendship and pleasure, and about the things that make for happiness. He ruminated on the distinction

between intellectual and moral virtue, and on the nature of perception and, further, cogitated about the soul's relation to the body. He wrote of cause and effect, the motions of the heavens, and of the essence of courage, justice, and equity, and of the ingredients of wisdom. All the tangibles of the physical world of nature were in his scope, but also the intangibles of mind, soul, and the very nature of God.

Not until Leonardo was there another such wide ranging intellect as that of Aristotle. And, in that span of nearly two millennia, Aristotle reigned as the supreme authority on all sorts of things, so much so, that, in the Middle Ages, it was said that if you wanted to know how many teeth were in a horse's mouth, you did not go out and count them: you consulted Aristotle. An exaggeration? Perhaps, but not by much. Aristotle mattered so greatly that, in the 13th century, it became virtually the life's work of the great mind of St. Thomas Aquinas to reconcile the notions of the Christian's God with the god of that pre-Christian philosopher from ancient Greece.

Aristotle's enduring legacy has to do with his development of logic, i. e. with Reason itself, and the methods by which the mind arrives at truth. His intuitions of cause and effect presaged the scientific method, and he laid down axioms, definitions, and hypothesis as fundamental ingredients. His most original discovery was the reduction of reasoning to the form of a syllogism that moves from the general to the specific and back again: All men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore, Socrates is mortal. All grass-eaters are herbivores; sheep eat grass; therefore, sheep are herbivores. We still live by the method, each and every day.

This background is important, for the idea is often heard that philosophy deals with ivory-tower sorts of things, abstract problems and conundrums that have little to no relationship to the daily life of the οἱ πολλοί, the people, the masses, including you and me. Not so. The ideas and ideals of those thinkers of the past, both ancient and more modern, have a way of trickling into and affecting our conceptions –and, often, our *preconceptions*, too.

Thus, Aristotle became an authority who was consulted by many and questioned by few, Socrates being no longer around. Slavery was a fact-under-foot, for Aristotle; he lived in the city of Athens, which was heavily populated with slaves. So, he could not and did not omit thinking about it; his thoughts are recorded under his rubric of *Politics*. (One of his famous sentences from that work is, "Man is, by nature, a political animal.") The first thing to be noted is that, in turning his rational skills to the subject of slavery, and being a bugger for thoroughness, he recognized that, in theory, there could be two sides to the question: Was slavery natural and, *therefore*, right and just? Or was it *unnatural* and, therefore, unjust and

immoral? The force of his argument comes through in his own words, if we quote them at some length:

“And so, in the arrangement of the family, a slave is a living possession, and property a number of such instruments. ...But is there anyone thus intended by nature to be slave, and for whom such a condition is expedient and right, or is not all slavery a violation of nature? There is no difficulty in answering this question, both of reason and of fact. For, that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule. ...And, indeed, the use made of slaves and tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life. ...It is clear then that some men are by nature free, and others slaves, and that for these latter, slavery is both expedient and right, ...the one to be slaves and the other to be masters: the one practicing obedience, the others exercising the authority and lordship that nature intended them to have.”

Again, philosophy is not academic speculation with no consequences to daily life. Exhibit A, to the contrary, is the manner in which slavery, at least in a huge portion of the world, came to be seen as “natural.” And, *ergo*, therefore, one doesn’t have to think much more about it; it can be assumed simply as a fact of life and the way things ought to be. Conceptions become preconceptions, strong, well-developed, full-bodied.

The Roman Empire continued with many of the Grecian assumptions and was virtually built on slaves, who represented perhaps a third of the population. The small upper class, at the very pinnacle of the huge human pyramid, lived in constant fear of an uprising. In the First Century B.C, it happened, led by the escaped slave and gladiator named Spartacus. His raging army of some 70,000 slaves terrified Rome for three years. However, divisions arose within the followers of Spartacus, weakening the force, and it did not prevail. As stated in a volume (in the Time-Life series on The Great Ages of Man) titled, *Imperial Rome*: “The Romans put down the rebellion and, in a grisly warning against future outbreaks, crucified 6,000 slaves and lined the 130-mile road from Rome to Capua with their crosses. During the years that followed, drastic laws were passing providing that all the slaves in a household, even when they numbered in the hundreds, might be killed if one of them murdered his master. The threat worked; there are no further serious slave outbreaks on record.” Slavery remained entrenched, the norm, the usual. The preconceived idea remained embodied in the flesh of millions.

We turn to Christopher Columbus. He had not read Aristotle, nor did he need to do so, in order to perform his deeds, for Aristotle’s ideas had already saturated his culture. The same was true

of the slavers from other European countries. The rightness, the “naturalness” of slavery was a presupposition, which meant, again, that it was hardly ever questioned.

There is now a heated debate in this country over many monuments, including those concerning Columbus. A very helpful book, based on scrupulous research, is *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbus Legacy*, a 450-page work by Kirkpatrick Sale, published in 1990, just before the 500th anniversary celebrations of “the discovery.” It documents, with excerpts from original sources, including letters and the Captain’s logs from the voyages, that he was all about gold, slaves, and fame, in that order. With more statues and place-names in the Western world than any other mortal, except Queen Victoria, most people are oblivious to the fact that, from the very start, the colonization project brought dehumanization and death to millions in the New World.

Landing in the Caribbean islands, the assumption was that, since there were no flags flying, the islands were not possessed by anyone (that mattered). The newcomers regarded peaceful native peoples with contempt, because they were not warriors: the assumption was that “might made right.” (The first structure erected by Europeans in the New World was a fortress.) “They bear no arms, and are all naked and of no skill in arms, and so very cowardly that a thousand would not stand against [our] three. ...They are fit to be ordered about and made to work, to sow and do everything else that is needed.” So wrote Captain Colon’, aka Columbus, on Dec. 16, 1492. And the work, performed by slaves in the tens of thousands, was going to be all about mining for gold. Later, Columbus anxiously moved from one island to the next, uninterested in anything else: “There may be many things I do not know, for I do not wish to delay, but to discover and go to many islands to find gold.” Again, “I will not delay much, since I see that there’s no mine of gold here.” (recorded in Captain’s log). All three of his voyages across the great and dangerous Atlantic Ocean were aimed at gold.

And it was the same with those who followed Columbus in the next few decades. One of them was Cortez, who landed in 1519 with his horses and highly weaponized small army in what is now Mexico. He spoke for almost all the movers and shakers who had turned their European sails to the West, when he told the Aztec ruler Montezuma, near what is now Mexico City (this upon receiving huge chests of treasure shortly before the slaughter), “We Spanish suffer from a strange sickness of the heart, for which the only known remedy is gold.” Slavery was the means to the end, and the end was gold. Payments to other explorers and other nations for necessary supplies were often made in slaves. People, human beings, killed, abused, trafficked, and sold for shiny metal, while diseases that accompanied the physical conquest would go on to take the lives of millions.

However, in America, many were oblivious to those evils of slave-colonialism elsewhere, or, more often, willfully overlooked them, this in the service of adding more Columbus-related celebrations in tune with a great, growing, and prosperous nation. In fact, in the 1820s, there was even some debate about changing our country's name from The United States of America to The United States of Columbia. But the glorified image of a great explorer, supposedly only intent upon discovering new knowledge, does not fit the facts. Today's place-names and shining statues have it all wrong. We know that, now. K. Sale, the author of the book about Columbus referenced above, near the conclusion, summarized how the "discovery," functioned for the American mind: "The Christopher Columbus image is a perfect example of a myth divorced from reality ...out of the figure of Columbus the nation now made something more than just a patriotic symbol, something in fact that represented the official national deity, Progress, and such attendant seraphim as Science, Wealth, Power, and Civilization." Much food for thought, there: many reasons to reconsider the monuments and all the preconceived notions involved.

Of course, slavery was also part of our own country's early history. The astonishing total of more than 12 million people were kidnapped from Africa or "bought" from other slavers and shipped as mere cargo to the New World. The great majority went to South America and the Caribbean, where Columbus had set the pattern. It was in 1619 that the first blacks arrived in the North American colonies and, over time, slavery thrived throughout New England. There were slave auctions even on the streets of New York. Slavery built the plantation economy of the Southern States, where cotton was king –a kind of white gold.

Steven Ambrose, in his book, *To America: Personal Reflections of an Historian*, reminds us that of our first fourteen Presidents, nine of them owned slaves: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, James Polk, and Franklin Pierce. Only Washington freed his, and that only at his death. In 1826, Jefferson was invited to Washington for the 50th Anniversary of the of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. He declined, because of illness; it would only be ten more days until his death, on July 4th, "of all days." Instead, he wrote and sent his final message to the country, including these words: "All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them."

Joseph Conrad, in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, wrote about whites in Africa, "They were no colonists. ...They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force –nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others. ...The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a

different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”

Charles Darwin, upon graduating from Cambridge University with a Bachelor of Arts degree, had plans to pursue the additional education that would lead toward being a clergyman. Instead, he signed on to a sea voyage, the end result of which was that we now owe to him the theory of the origin of new species through natural selection. He had his first vague glimmerings of the great idea while serving as a naturalist aboard Her Majesty’s Ship, *The Beagle*, which set sail in December of 1831. The expedition was expected to last two years, but it turned out to be nearly five and, during that time, the crew circumnavigated the South American continent and explored islands of the Pacific, including The Galapagos. Natural history, encompassing the landforms and their flora and fauna of that vast region, was Darwin’s focus. However, in the process, he was well exposed to a great diversity of the human family residing in many countries, climates, and conditions. Upon returning to England, he worked on his journal and, in 1839, published his account in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, to wide acclaim.

Darwin was a person of his time, as all of us are, and thus shared some of the biases of the educated English upper class of which he was a part, but those were not many, especially considering that his country was a dominant world power. Compared to most people, he saw things with new eyes, not only in nature, but in humanity, as well. As the great exploration was drawing to a close and he was heading home, his revulsion at the reality of slavery was clearly noted: “On the 19th of August [1836] we finally left the shores of Brazil. I thank God that I shall never visit another slave-country.” He wrote, “Near Rio de Janeiro I lived opposite to an old lady, who kept screws to crush the fingers of her female slaves. I stayed in a house where a young household mulatto, daily and hourly, was reviled, beaten, and persecuted enough to break the spirit of the lowest animal.” (He also agonized over the conditions under which many, in his own country, were forced to live: “If the misery of our poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, how great is our sin.”) England had already abolished slavery by the edict of King George III in 1807, and the young Darwin had quite enlightened views concerning its evil. Near the very end of his book on the voyage, he wrote:

“Those who look tenderly at the slave owner, and with a cold heart at the slave, never seem to put themselves into the position of the latter; what a cheerless prospect, with not even a hope of change. Picture yourself, chance ever hanging over you, of your wife and little children –those objects which nature urges even the slaves to call his own-- being torn from you and sold like beasts to the highest bidder! And these deeds are done and palliated by men who profess to love their neighbors as themselves, who believe in God, and pray that his will be done on earth! It makes one’s blood boil, yet heart

tremble, to think that we Englishmen and our American descendants, with their boastful cry of liberty, have been and are so guilty; but it is a consolation to reflect that we at least have made a greater sacrifice than ever made by any nation to expiate our sin.”

Most of us, perhaps, know a fair amount about how the slavery issue played out in America and led to The Civil War. The cause of the war was never in doubt, even though there have been many attempts, even presently, to re-write history and to say that it was simply about so-called states’ rights. No one should tolerate that lie. It was all about the envisioned right of the states to continue enslaving human beings, and it’s important to actually see it in print, “in black and white.” The President of the newly declared Confederacy was Jefferson Davis, and his Vice President was Alexander H. Stephens. In his inauguration speech on March 21st, 1861, Stephens laid out, in the clearest of terms, the reason for secession from the Union. Speaking of the principles enshrined in The United States Constitution, he declared:

“Those ideas were fundamentally wrong. They rested on the assumption of the equality of the races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation and the government built upon it fell when the ‘storm came and the wind blew.’ Our new government is founded on exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery –subordination to the superior race—is his natural and normal condition. ...Those at the North, who still cling to these errors, with a zeal above knowledge, we justly denominate fanatics. All fanaticism springs from an aberration of the mind –from a defect in reasoning. It is a species of insanity. ...[Ours] is the first government ever instituted upon the principles in strict conformity to nature, and the ordination of Providence, in furnishing the materials of human society. Many governments have been founded on the principle of subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature’s laws. With us, all of the white race, however, high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eyes of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. The substratum of our society is made of the material fitted by nature for it, and by experience we know that it is best, not only for the superior, but also for the inferior race that it should be so.”

Language invoking assumed laws of nature --Aristotle, all over again. The South opened fire on Fort Sumter in South Carolina in the early morning hours of April 12th, and the Civil War began with a bang. The cost of this presupposition of white superiority was extremely high, certainly for the North, that sought to avoid war. But it was also incredibly expensive for the South, the side that rushed to the carnage, this in order to uphold blatant and dehumanizing racism as a supreme value. Hundreds of thousands of southerners were willing to die for the “idea” of

inequality, and did. Do I recall, in the speech above, something about fanatics? In spite of the attempt at being ultra-rational, the defense of slavery is a litany of irrational preconceptions.

Perhaps, one should not attempt to explain what poets say. (E. B. White's wife once called to him from the next room, "Poets should be more clear!" Then, of course, they would not be poets; there's more to words than definitions.) However, let me say this: In the following verse by e. e. cummings (who wrote his name and his poems in lower case), I think he is attempting to put into print the jumble, the emotional mush, the barely half-conscious thought-process of many "patriots," who know little to nothing of which they speak:

“next to of course god America i
love you land of the pilgrims' and so forth oh
say can you see by the dawn's early my
country 'tis of centuries come and go
and are no more what of it we should worry
in every language even deafanddumb
thy sons acclaim your glorious name by gorry
by jingo by gee by gosh by gum
why talk of beauty what could be more beaut-
iful than those heroic happy dead
who rushed like lions to the roaring slaughter
they did not stop to think they died instead
then shall the voice of liberty be mute?’
He spoke. And drank rapidly a glass of water.”

The issue of racism has never left America. George Orwell's characterization of the 20th century in his book, *Animal Farm*, was fitting: "All the animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." However, the complicated legacies of slavery are now more nearly out in the open, including how establishment white people often view minorities, often claim entitlement, and how black Americans are still treated as being "naturally" inferior beings. These days, the issues are often in the news, and there are many passionate and articulate voices speaking to such matters of conscience. There is still a long way to go, but progress is being made toward being more fully "the land of the free" and, for that, at least, we can be grateful.

Henry David Thoreau picked up arrowheads around Walden Pond and in the hills surrounding Concord, Massachusetts (the latter is an Algonquian Indian name, meaning "by the range of hills.") In his journal of March, 1859, he writes, "They are not fossil bones, but, as it were, fossil thoughts, forever reminding me of the mind that shaped them. I would fain know that I am

treading in the tracks of human game –that I am on the trail of mind—and these little reminders never fail to set me right.” Of the arrowhead, again: “It was originally winged for a short flight, but it still, to my mind’s eye, wings its way through the ages, bearing a message from the hand that shot it. Myriads of arrow-points lie sleeping in the skin of the revolving earth, while meteors revolve in space.”

Thoreau had immediate contact with some of the few remaining people of Indian descent in the region. In his journal for April 1841, he muses on the contrasting attitudes of whites and Indians, and weighs in on the side of the Indian:

“The charm of the Indian to me is that he stands free and unconstrained in Nature, is her inhabitant and not her guest, and wears her easily and gracefully. But the civilized man has the habit of the house. His house is a prison, in which he finds himself oppressed and confined, not sheltered and protected. ...The white man comes, pale as the dawn, with a load of thought ...He buys the Indian’s moccasins and baskets, then buys his hunting grounds, and at length forgets where he [the Indian] is buried and plows up his bones. ...It is the spirit of humanity ...that interests us most. The thought of a so-called savage tribe is generally far more just than that of a single civilized man.”

In those days, not all had the mind’s eye of a Thoreau, or a Whitman, or an Emerson. Whatever peaceful interaction had been achieved, specifically then and there, would not characterize the frontier as it extended farther West. For, the frontier never ceased expanding and, as it crossed the wide Missouri and moved into the western Dakotas, Wyoming, and Montana, our white ancestors were determined that there was nothing that could, or should, stop its advance, and surely not any ideal of equality. The dominant perspective was clearly expressed by *The Daily Rocky Mountain News* of Denver, in its issue of August 10, 1864, with its full-throated endorsement of Governor John Evans’ call to eradicate the Indians: “Self-preservation demands decisive action, and the only way to secure it is to fight them [the Indians] in their own way. A few months of active extermination against the red devils will bring quiet, and nothing else will.” With the characterization of the Indians as “red devils” already implanted as a subconscious reality in the minds of the multitudes who wished for nothing to obstruct what they saw as Progress, the conclusion followed in obvious, acceptable, and in almost automatic fashion. It needed no further defense; it did not even require a “dressing up” of language: exterminate them!

And the advance of the frontier was relentless and was marked by a series of broken treaties, as native peoples were pushed, defeated, and, finally, compressed into small reservations. Before it was accomplished, in totality, there had been one last major treaty, that of 1868.

Signed at Fort Laramie, it marked the conclusion of the war led by Red Cloud of the Sioux to stop the Bozeman Trail through Wyoming and Montana. The treaty was comprehensive and guaranteed Indian land from the entire western half of what is now the State of South Dakota; everything west of the Missouri River was to be The Great Sioux Reservation. The area included the Black Hills, which was the Sioux's sacred place, *Pa Sapa*, the very center of their universe. The treaty presented by The United States government, and signed by the Sioux, specifically promised the Black Hills to them "as long as the grass grows and the water flows." Which turned out to be only six years.

The Army was considering where to place a series of forts for protecting the advancing railroad. In the summer of 1874, a reconnaissance expedition under Col. George Armstrong Custer entered the Hills. This is he who had become a hero in the Civil War. Because of his skill and boldness in combat and, also, because of his self-promotion and friendship with higher-ups in the Union Army, he was made brigadier general by age 23. After the conclusion of that war, his rank was reduced to Colonel, and he was sent West to fight the Indians on the frontier. His flamboyant exploits were reported back East in major newspapers and magazines. (We can assume the accounts did not include events such as the massacre of a hundred men, women, and children who were attacked at dawn, in their sleep, at a mid-winter's snowbound camp along the Washita River in Oklahoma, after which the Indians' herd of some 800 horses were slaughtered, just to make sure that any individuals who survived would be totally devastated.)

In Custer's own book, *My Life on the Plains: or Personal Experiences with Indians*, he complains that works of fiction, such as James Fennimore Cooper's series, *The Leatherstocking Tales*, had long painted a romantic and unrealistic picture of the Indian. Thus, he writes,

"Stripped of the beautiful romance with which we have been so long willing to envelope him, transferred from the inviting pages of the novelist to the localities where we are compelled to meet him, in his native village, on the war path, and when raiding upon our frontier settlements and lines of travel, the Indian forfeits his claim to the appellation of the 'noble red man.' We see him as he is, and, so far as all knowledge goes, as he has ever been, a savage in every sense of the word; not worse, perhaps, than his white brother would be similarly born and bred, but one whose cruel and ferocious nature far exceeds that of any wild beast of the desert."

The Custer expedition to the Hills spelled doom for the 1868 treaty, for what Custer's men found, in 1874, as described in their report, was not just gold --but gold, "from the grassroots down." The exaggerated news of the discovery spread far and wide and, soon, Custer's Trail was deeply worn by treasure hunters. In September of the next year, there were discussions

about the government buying the Hills, but the Indians would have none of it. Crazy Horse said, "One does not sell the land on which the people walk." Just six months later, there were already some 11,000 whites, illegally, in Custer City in the southern part of the Hills, something the Army did nothing to prevent. The next move was to order all Indians to obey an edict to travel from afar, even in the midst of winter, to surrender at small reservations. Any who did not (or could not) were deemed to be "hostile." In the spring, a number of strong cavalry forces were sent into the entire region to root out any and all who had not complied. Custer was on such a mission in June of 1876, when he was thrilled to find a huge encampment of Sioux in the valley of the Little Big Horn River northeast of the Big Horn Mountains, just into Montana. In characteristic arrogance, without waiting for reinforcements, he rushed to the attack. We know the rest of the story, at least in outline. The warriors, led by Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, annihilated the cavalry in just a few minutes' time.

They won the battle, but it was the beginning of the end of freedom for native peoples of the plains. As Dee Brown writes in *The American West*, "The stream of fortune hunters flowed ever wider, and the heart of the Sacred Hills was burrowed into as if by so many prairie dogs. The claims of the Indians were brushed away with one hand, while the other dipped the gold pan." Soon, almost all the Plains Indians would be either dead or moved here and there to small reservations, places so unlike the vast and varied lands they had known. The ways of a free-roaming culture of people attuned to the living wilderness came swiftly to an end.

In 1980, the U. S. Supreme Court set aside \$105 million in compensation to the Great Sioux Nation for the illegal taking of the Black Hills; it was refused. The trust funds have grown to \$1.2 billion. The offer is still met with refusal. (With a Sioux population of some 100,000 people, the settlement would amount to something like \$10,000 per person; that could be spent rather quickly, and then what do you have?) The Tribe doesn't want money; instead, its members want the government to keep its promise. They want the Black Hills, *Pa Sapa*, their ancestral and spiritual home, "the center of all that is."

Meanwhile, at Mount Rushmore, the immense sculpted heads of the four white Presidents, four white Commanders in Chiefs, look down in stony silence from the high vantage point in the sacred Hills. From them, there can be no glimmer of recognition, no understanding, hope, or sign of kinship. For that, we look to live human beings, i. e. to one another. Every year, our citizens throng by the millions to this place of honor, in order to gaze in awe at the sculptures, -- because of their immensity, but, also, for the meanings that have been attached-- to rekindle inspiring thoughts of loyalty to and celebration of our country. I've been there with the crowds, long ago, as a young person. I've had all the warm feelings. Now, I know that not everyone sees

them in the same light, nor can they, and we white folks must not suppose that they should, and least of all the Indian peoples, given the history.

To state the obvious, all human beings are flawed, and that applies to the four Presidents memorialized at Mount Rushmore. They all did great things for the nation, or their chiseled stone images would not be there. Yet, according to Collin G. Calloway of Dartmouth College, Washington had become known as the “Town Destroyer” among the Iroquois after 1779, when he called for “total destruction and devastation” of American Indian settlements all across upstate New York. Teddy Roosevelt was elected President in 1901. I have very high regard for all that he did for forest conservation and wildlife refuges, but his record is marred by his attitude toward Native Americans. In an 1886 speech, he spoke these atrocious words: “I don’t go so far as to think that the only good Indians are dead Indians, but I believe nine out of every ten are.” (This was an echo of a prior sentiment attributed to Civil War General Phillip Sheridan, who, after the War between the States, supervised the war against the tribes in the West. The town of Sheridan, Wyoming, at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains, is named after him.)

In the play *Ghosts*, by the Norwegian writer Henrik Ibsen, one Mrs. Alving says, “The longer I live, the more convinced am that we’re all haunted in this world –not only by the things we inherit from our parents—but by the ghosts of innumerable old prejudices and beliefs –half-forgotten cruelties and betrayals-- we may not even be aware of them—but they’re there, just the same –and we can’t get rid of them. The whole world is haunted by these ghosts of the dead past; you have only to pick up a newspaper to see them weaving in and out between the lines—Ah! If we only had the courage to sweep them all out and let in the light!”

Once again, I remember the timeless observation of William Faulkner: “The past is not dead -- It’s not even past.” The word “prejudice” means, literally, to pre-judge, before all the facts are at hand. And that is what *pre*-suppositions do; they lead us to jump to conclusions *prematurely*. They circumvent relevant evidence. They draw the mental shades and put blinders on the imagination. They are like the small gold coin held before the eye that blocks the view of the largest mountain. They lead us to conclude that things simply are the way they are supposed to be, or that we can’t do anything about them, so we need to adjust and accept them; after all, “it’s only natural.” It’s the type of view, about which E. B. White warned us, that it would be expensive; and so, it is, and on many levels. However, to sort through and to separate good conceptions from bad, and to uplift the good --well, that is like finding genuine treasure, not to be compared to mere gold.

In the warm summer months on the prairies, the humid atmosphere, in its long passage from the Pacific, cooks up billowing white cumulus clouds, mountains of them. I’m far from the first

to think of the comparison; the image is plain. John Muir, however, thought deeper thoughts, as he roamed the High Sierra region of California. In his journal of 1869, he noted on a particular day: “Cumuli rising to the eastward. How beautiful their pearly bosses! How well they harmonize with the upwelling rocks beneath them! The mountains of the sky, solid-looking, finely sculptured.” And on another day: “What can poor mortals say about clouds?” [For, they are ephemeral, they vanish before our words and our eyes.] “Nevertheless,” he said, “these fleeting sky-mountains are as substantial and significant as the more lasting upheavals of granite beneath them. Both alike are built up and die, and in God’s calendar, difference of duration is nothing.”

Muir’s vision of the universe had much in common with that of Native American peoples. The view of most of us, at least of European descent, whose daily routines are so thickly insulated from Nature, tends to be simply of isolated objects: each different, separate, countable, and unrelated. However, as we see the white clouds over Mount Rushmore, as well as more lofty peaks elsewhere, it is not easy, sometimes, to define their foggy boundaries, as vaporous fingers of moisture intersect with valleys of rock. How do they relate? Are they two distinct coagulations: opaque layers of H₂O molecules that simply happen to be located over and above the other substance, the hard-edged granite batholiths, composed, in turn, of silica, feldspar, and mica? Simply those? Or, something else --wherein any Something is a part of Everything. “What you see is what you get.” What do we suppose --and *presuppose*-- is the natural world?

Finally, concerning that term “natural,” which has been so much abused throughout history, as this survey has shown: What do we see as being natural --as opposed to sacred? Or is it that the truly Natural is, itself, Sacred all the way through and from top to bottom, and that these are not two different things, at all? I think I know. And I think the answer has a strong, full-bodied bearing on all those issues that divide people and could help to make us, not just in name, but more nearly in fact, one human family.

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