

The End of the Speed Limit on the Highway to Nowhere

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Theme: [History](#)

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There was a time when time was time and space and speed had some human meaning, for people lived within the limits of the natural world of which they were a part.

As Albert Camus said, “In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once dark Furies swoop down upon us to destroy.”

The destruction is now upon us.

In former days you could cross over to other people’s lives and come back with a different perspective, knowing what was obvious was true and that to exist meant to be composed of flesh and blood like all the others in different places and to be bound by the natural cycles of life and death, spring and fall, summer and winter. There were limits then, on the land, water, and even in the sky, where space too had dimensions and the stars and planets weren’t imaginary landing strips for mad scientists and their partners in celluloid fantasies.

In that rapidly disappearing world where people felt situated in space and time, life was not yet a holographic spectacle of repetitive images and words, a pseudo-world of shadowy figures engaging in pseudo-debates on electronic screens with people traveling from one place to another only to find that they never left home. When the mind is homeless and the grey magic of digital propaganda is its element, life becomes a vast circinate wandering to nowhere. The experience of traveling thousands of miles only to see the same chain of stores lining the same roads in the same towns across a country where the same people live with their same machines and same thoughts in their same lives in their same clothes. A mass society of mass minds in the hive created by cell phones and measured in nanoseconds where the choices are the freedom to choose what is always the same within a cage of categories meant to render all reality a “mediated reality.”

Without roots we are like Sisyphus pushing his rock not up the hill but in circles, only to reach what we think is the end is the beginning again. Runners in the circle game.

People’s roots were what once gave them distinction, a place to stand against the liquid flow

of modernity and its disillusionments. These roots were cultural and geographic, material and spiritual. They went deep. Such rootedness was not a panacea, simply a place to take a stand. It gave a bit of stability, the sense of real existing individuals with identities, histories, ground under their feet. It was possible to meet others as different but equally human despite their different roots, and to grasp our common reality. It was the antithesis of globalization, of sameness. It was diversity before there was fake diversity.

The idea of roots has become even more complicated since Simone Weil wrote her well-known book, *The Need for Roots*, in 1943. Even then she admitted this:

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define.

So I will not try to do so. Like so much in life, it's reality involves both a yes and a no, like our relationship to time.

For we have always been time-bound creatures, caught in its mystery, and we always will be. This was true before the invention of clocks, although the clock ushered in a technological revolution from which we've never looked back. Most people are now on speed going nowhere.

I recently looked back at a series of photographs that my parents had taken of me when I was about two years old. They were shot at our home by a professional photographer and got me thinking about three themes that have always fascinated me and which lie at the center of our world today: cameras, clocks, and mirrors. Each plays a significant part in what Guy Debord called *The Society of the Spectacle*:

In societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation...The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him.

I, the only boy with seven sisters, was dressed for the occasion in shorts and a polo shirt with suspenders. Like a little model. An actor on a stage, a player in the spectacle before the spectacle became all-consuming. Some of the photos were of me standing on a couch in front of a large mirror, double images, some with me looking away and others looking into the mirror. Two boys in a mirror world. Images. A few captured me winding up a metal mechanical toy soldier so he could march across the floor to war. Others were of me looking up at a grandfather clock, focused on the time I couldn't have understood; seeing the hands of time I couldn't tell. Those photographs froze me in time as they were meant to do. They lie before me now as afterimages of my earliest memories and my later concerns. Time will decompose the paper they are printed on, just as my memories will disappear with my final journey.

I write these words from the third floor of the old Rogues Harbor Inn to anchor my sojourner's passage through the mists of time. The old clocks throughout this ancient hotel are all stopped. It is and is not comforting. Yet these words move as I write them but stop when I'm done. They too are a double-edged sword. We want to stop time's passage but to live as well, and you can't have both simultaneously. Maybe words are edible, and once

they are written they must be eaten. Then they are gone.

After fifty years I have returned to Ithaca, New York for three days and nights. Everything has changed, changed utterly. When I first arrived here half a century ago, I came to spend a few days with Fr. Daniel Berrigan, S.J. on my exit from the Marines Corps and my jettisoning of the mechanical soldier's life. I had to move out of the photographs.

The boats are still anchored in the sea-like Cayuga Lake along whose west side lies the towns of Ovid and Ulysses through which we passed to taste the wine pressed from the vines whose roots sink deep into this earth. To imbibe the fruit of these vines on a beautiful day is to feel happy. The names evoke the traditions of classical Greece and Rome, but when you study history, you realize that the soil then and now is soaked deep with the blood of innocents.

Walking through the ancient deep gorge that leads to the beautiful Taughannock Falls, the tallest free-falling waterfall east of the Mississippi River at 66 meters, beauty dominates your mind. But when you grasp the history of how the native Iroquois tribes were massacred right here by the European settlers who drove them from their roots in this land, the natural beauty turns a darker shade of red. Your mind flips.

Is there is any place on this blood-soaked earth where a semi-conscious person can rest easy? For beauty is the beginning of terror, is it not, the terrible realization that, as Rilke said, "every angel is terrible"? And we are the terrible angels, exulting in beauty and often loving life so much that it brings us to tears, for we know it will end, and so we kill others to extend our lives, thinking it will bring us peace, even as we falsely cry peace, peace, when there is no peace.

If we think radically and go to the roots (Latin, *radix*) of human existence, we uncover, our double-consciousness, the tragicomic state of laughter and despair, suffering and happiness that has no end. There is no escape for mortals, even though history is replete with so many failed efforts to transcend the limits of the possible. The modern project to achieve perfection and total control is a technological Faustian effort to transcend our humanity, now with artificial intelligence, digital dementia, and the marriage of the human to the machine. This mad quest goes by many names (Lewis Mumford presciently called it *The Myth of the Machine*), but it is always directed by ruling elites to gather more power to themselves. Today it is called the Great Reset, using medical technology and "vaccines" as the leading edge of its spear to disembowel our humanity. It may succeed because so many people have lost a rootedness in the lived spiritual experience of a sacred vision of an escape from our enigma. With this loss, they have lost the utopian vision that inspires hope when there is no hope.

The much-maligned English writer, D. H. Lawrence, grasped this in the years after the mass insanity of World War I when he wrote:

We are all spectres....spectres to one another....abstracted reality....Shadow you are even to yourself...abstracted reality....We are not solid. We don't live in the flesh. Our instincts and intuitions are dead, we live wound round with the winding-sheet of abstraction. And the touch of anything solid hurts us. For our instincts and intuitions which are our feelers of touch and knowing through touch, they are dead, amputated. We walk and talk and eat and copulate and evacuate wrapped in our winding-sheets, all the time wrapped in our winding-sheets.

There's a man I know very well, who, when his brother-in-law died, was given one of his watches. The brother-in-law had been an accountant who saved everything that passed through his hands, from ticket stubs to scraps of notes and old pens and jewelry that his mother had worn eighty years before, including many of her watches. Everything. His passion to save was countered by his speed at getting to the finish line. He was a champion runner, who had grown up in the Depression and his parents were immigrants who worked hard to survive. The watch had never been used. It was a beautiful wind-up watch the man had won as part of a collegiate four-man two-mile relay track team that had set a world record at a major track meet. The man had, through grit and perseverance, won a track scholarship to this prestigious university where he had excelled at running very fast. The back of the watch was inscribed from the Meet Committee with the date, place, and record time.

My friend used the watch regularly, winding it every morning. It ran a few minutes slow every day, insulting the fleet feet of his brother-in-law, who of course was Greek. One day, while winding the watch, the man dropped it and it stopped. The jeweler said it would be very expensive to repair, so the man decided to set it at 12:00 and leave it at that stop-time. He kept wearing it and when anyone asked him for the time, he'd show it to them, saying it was high noon or midnight at the oasis, or, if they preferred, NOW. Naturally this was received with quizzical looks.

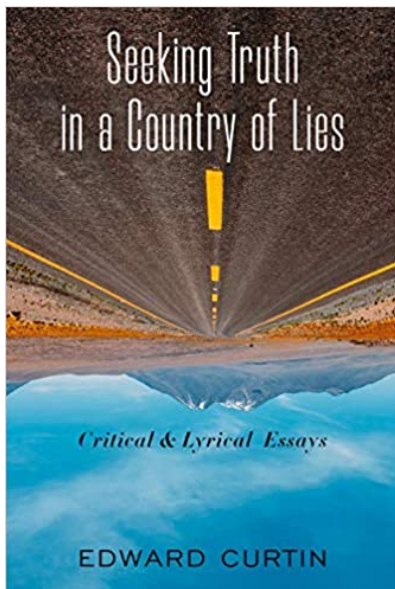
This always made him cry before he laughed.

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