



ESCAPE

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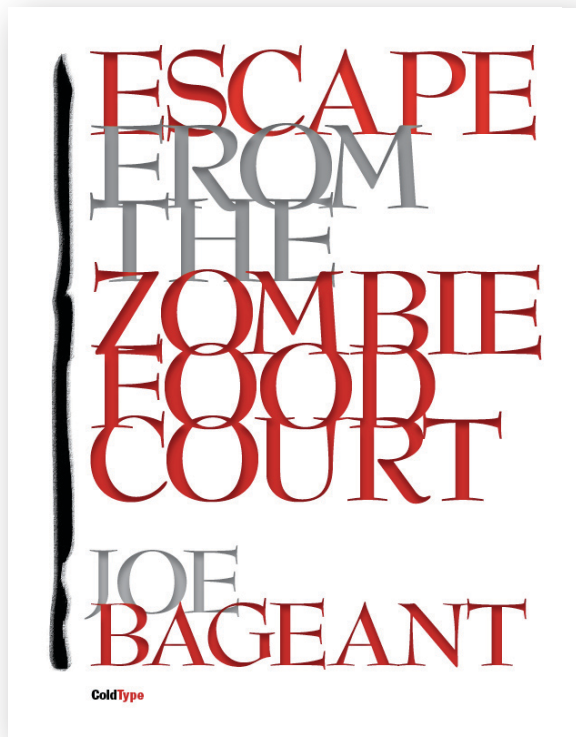
THE

ZOMBIE

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JOE

BAGEANT



THE AUTHOR

Joe Bageant is the author of the best selling *Deer Hunting With Jesus: Dispatches from America's class war* (Random House, 2007) and a frequent contributor to the BBC and other international media. A selection of his writings and commentary from working class Americans may be found at [Joe Bageant.com](http://JoeBageant.com)

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ESCAPE FROM THE ZOMBIE FOOD COURT JOE BAGEANT

*Joe Bageant recently spoke at Berea College in Berea, Kentucky, Eastern Kentucky University at Lexington, and the Adler School of Professional Psychology in Chicago, where he was invited to speak on American consciousness and what he dubbed "The American Hologram," in his book, *Deer Hunting With Jesus*. This is a text version of the talks, assembled from his remarks at all three schools*

I just returned from several months in Central America. And the day I returned I had iguana eggs for breakfast, airline pretzels for lunch and a \$7 shot of Jack Daniels for dinner at the Houston Airport, where I spent two hours listening to a Christian religious fanatic tell about Obama running a worldwide child porn ring out of the White House. Entering the country shoeless through airport homeland security, holding up my pants because they don't let old men wear suspenders through security, well, I knew I was back home in the land of the free.

Anyway, here I am with you good people asking myself the first logical question: What the hell is a redneck writer supposed to say to a prestigious school of psychology? Why of all places am I here? It is intimidating as hell. But as Janna Henning and Sharrod Taylor here have reassured me that all I need to do is talk about is what I write about. And what

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The world however, is not a cultural history course, a National Geographic special or recreational destination. It is a real place with many fast developing disasters, economic and ecological collapse being just two

I write about is Americans, and why we think and behave the way we so. To do that here today I am forced to talk about three things -- corporations, television and human spirituality.

No matter how smart we may think we are, the larger world cannot and does not exist for most of us in this room, except through media and maybe through the shallow experience of tourism, or in the minority instance, we may know of it through higher education. The world however, is not a cultural history course, a National Geographic special or recreational destination. It is a real place with many fast developing disasters, economic and ecological collapse being just two. The more aware among us grasp that there is much at stake. Yet, even the most informed and educated Americans have cultural conditioning working against them round the clock.

As psych students, most of you understand that there is no way you can escape being conditioned by your society, one

way or another. You are as conditioned as any trained chicken in a carnival. So am I. When we go to the ATM machine and punch the buttons to make cash fall out, we are doing the same thing as the chickens that peck the colored buttons make corn drop from the feeder. You will not do a single thing today, tomorrow or the next day that you have not been generally indoctrinated and deeply conditioned to do -- mostly along class lines.

For instance, as university students, you are among the 20% or so of Americans indoctrinated and conditioned to be the administrating and operating class of the American Empire in some form or another. In the business of managing the other 75% in innumerable ways. Psychologists, teachers, lawyers, social workers, doctors, accountants, sociologists, mental health workers, clergy -- all are in the business of coordinating and managing the greater mass of working class citizenry by the Empire's approved methods, and toward the same end: Maximum profitability for a corporate based state.

Yet it all seems so normal. Certainly the psychologists who have prescribed so much Prozac that it now shows up in the piss of penguins, saw what they did as necessary. And the doctors who enable the profitable blackmail practiced by the medical industries see it all as part of the most technologically advanced medical system in the world. And the teacher, who sees no problem with 20% of her fourth graders being on Ritalin, in the name of "appropriate behavior," is happy to have control of her classroom. None of these feel like dupes or pawns of a corporate state. It seems like just the way things are. Just modern American reality. Which is a corporate generated reality.

Given the financialization of all aspects of our culture and lives, even our



We believe that we dare not let corporations die. Corporations feed us. They entertain us. Corporations occupy one full half of our waking hours of our lives, through employment, either directly or indirectly.

so-called leisure time, it is not an exaggeration to say that true democracy is dead and a corporate financial state has now arrived. If you can get your head around that, it's not hard to see an ever merging global corporate system masquerading electronically and digitally as a nation called the United States. Or Japan for that matter. The corporation now animates us from within our very selves through management of the need hierarchy in goods and information.

As students, even in such an enlightened institution as this one, you are being subjected to the at least some of pedagogy of the corporate management of society for maximum profit. Unarguably your training will help many fellow human beings. But in the larger scheme of things, you are part of an institution, the American Psycho-socio-medical complex, and thus authorized to manage public consciousness, one person at a time. Remember that the entire pedagogy in which you are immersed is itself immersed in a corporate financial state. Even if some of what you do is alternative psychology, that is a reaction to the state, and therefore a result of it. It's still part of the financialization of consciousness. And, I might add that none you expect to work for nothing.

This financialization of our consciousness under American style capitalism has become all we know. That's why we fear its loss. Hence the bailouts of the thousands of "zombie banks," dead but still walking, thanks to the people's taxpayer offerings to the money god so that banks will not die. We believe that we dare not let corporations die. Corporations feed us. They entertain us. Corporations occupy one full half of our waking hours of our lives, through employment, either directly or indirectly. They heal us when we

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are sick. So it's easy to see why the corporations feel like a friendly benevolent entity in the larger American consciousness. Corporations are, of course, deathless and faceless machines, and have no soul or human emotions. That we look to them for so much makes us a corporate cult, and makes corporations a fetish of our culture. Yet to us, they are like the weather just there.

All of us live together in this corporate fetish cult. We agree upon and consent to its reality, just as the Aztecs agreed upon Quetzalcoatl and the lost people of Easter Island agreed that the great stone effigies of their remote island had significance.

We are not unique

Strangely enough, even as a population mass operating under unified corporate management machinery, most Americans believe they are unique individuals, significantly different from every other person around them. More than any other people I have met, Americans fear loss of uniqueness. Yet you and I are not unique in the least. Despite the American yada yada about individualism, you are not special. Nor am I. Just because we come from the manufacturer equipped with individual consciousness, does not make us the center of any unique world, private or public, material, intellectual or spiritual. The fact is, you will seldom if ever make any significant material or lifestyle choices of your own in your entire life. If you don't buy that house, someone else will. If you don't marry him, someone else will. If you don't become a psychologist, lawyer or a clergyman or a telemarketer, someone else will. We are all replaceable parts in the machinery of a capitalist economy. "Oh but we have unique feelings and emotions that are



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important," we say. Psychologists specialize in this notion. Yet I venture to say that none of us will ever feel an emotion that someone long dead has not felt, or some as yet unborn person will not feel. We are swimmers in an ancient rushing river of humanity. You, me, the people in my Central American village, the child in Bangladesh, and the millionaire frat boys who run our financial and governmental institutions with such adolescent carelessness. All of our lives will eventually be absorbed without leaving a trace. Still though, for Western peoples in particular, there is the restless inner cultural need to differentiate our lives from the other swimmers. Most of us, especially as educated people in the Western World, will never beat that one.

Fortunately though, we can meaningfully differentiate our lives (at least in the Western sense) in the way we choose to employ our consciousness. Which is to say, to own our consciousness. If we exercise enough personal courage, we can possess the freedom to discover real meaning and value in our all-too-brief lives. We either wake up to life, or we do not. We are either in charge of our own awareness or we let someone else manage it by default. That we have a choice is damned good news.

The bad news is that we nevertheless remain one of the most controlled peoples on the planet, especially regarding control of our consciousness, public and private. And the control is tightening. I know it doesn't feel like that to most Americans. But therein rests the proof. Everything feels normal; everybody else around us is doing the same things, so it must be OK. This is a sort of Stockholm Syndrome of the soul, in which the prisoner identifies with the values of his or her captors, which in our case is of

course, the American corporate state and its manufactured popular culture.

When we feel that such a life is normal, even desirable, and we act accordingly, we become helpless. Learned helplessness. For instance, most Americans believe there is little they can do in personally dealing with the most important moral and material crises ever faced, both in America and across the planet, beginning with ecocide, war making, and the grotesque deformation of the democratic process we have settled for. Citizenship has been reduced to simple consumer group consciousness. Consequently, even though Americans are only six percent of the planet's population, we use 36% of the planet's resources. And we interpret that experience as normal and desirable and as evidence of being the most advanced nation in the world. Despite that our lives have been reduced to a mere marketing demographic.

Let me digress for just a moment, to tell you about how life is outside the marketing demographic. I live much of the year in the Third World country of Belize, Central America, a nation so damned poor that our cash bounces. True, it ain't Zimbabwe, or the Sudan -- there are no dying people in the streets. But food security is easily the biggest problem and growing by the day.

Yet, despite our meager and diminishing resources down there, and much government corruption, people are still citizens, not marketing demographics, not yet anyway. Citizens who struggle toward a just society. They have made more progress than the United States in some respects. For instance, we have: A level of free medical care for the poor, though we lack much equipment and facilities. Maternity pay if either you or your spouse are employed. Retirement on Social Se-



Central America sure as hell ain't heaven. But lives there are not what we Americans are told about the Third World either. It's not a flyblown, dangerous place run by murdering drug lords, and full of miserable people. It's just a whole lot of very poor people trying to get by and make a decent society

curity at age 60. Worker rights, such as mandatory accrued severance pay for workers, even temporary workers. Most Belizeans own their homes outright, and all citizens are entitled to a free piece of land upon which to build one. Employment is scarce, and that has a down side: Many folks waste a lot of valuable time having sex, perhaps because they have too much time on their hands. The Jehovah's Witnesses missionaries are working hard to fix that problem.

Anyway, American and Canadian tourists drive by in their rented SUVs and you can see by their expressions they are scared as hell of those barefooted black folks in the sand around them. Central America sure as hell ain't heaven. But lives there are not what we Americans are told about the Third World either. It's not a flyblown, dangerous place run by murdering drug lords, and full of miserable people. It's just a whole lot of very poor people trying to get by and make a decent society.

I mention these things because it's a good example of how North Americans live in a parallel universe in which they are conditioned to see everything in terms of consumer goods and "safety," as defined by police control. Conditioned to believe they have the best lives on the planet by every measure. So when they see our village and its veneer of "tropical grunge," they experience fear. Anything outside of the parameters of the cultural hallucination they call "the first world" represents fear and psychological free fall.

Yet, even if we think in that sort of outdated terminology, first, second and Third World, and most Americans do, then America is a second world nation. We have no universal free health care (don't kid yourself about the plan underway), no guarantee of anything really, except

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competitive struggle with one another for work and money and career status, if you are one of those conditioned to think of your job and feudal debt enslavement as a “career.” High infant mortality rates, abysmal educational scores, poor diet, no national public transportation system, crumbling infrastructure, a collapsed economy, even by our own definition we are a second world nation.

Learning to love shiny objects

But there is a shiny commercial skin that covers everything American, a thin layer of glossy throwaway technology, that leads the citizenry to believe otherwise. That slick commercial skin, the bright colored signs for Circuit City and The Gap (rest in peace), the clear plastic that covers every product from CDs to pre-cut vegetables, the friendly yellow and red wrapper on the burger inside its bright red paper box, the glossy branding of every item and experience. These things are the supposed tangible evidence that the slick conditioned illusion, the one I call The American Hologram, is indeed real. If it’s bright and shiny and new, it must be better. Right? It’s the complete opposite of tropical grunge.

Last week when I got back to the States I took a shower in an American friend’s new \$30,000 gleaming remodeled bathroom. It felt like a surgical operating room experience, compared to wading into the Caribbean surf in the tropical dusk with a bar of soap. Like a parallel universe straight out of The Matrix.

Meat space versus the parallel universe

So how is it that we Americans came to live in such a parallel universe? How is it that we prefer such things as Facebook (don’t get me wrong, I’m on Facebook too), and riding around the suburbs with



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an iPod plugged into our brain looking for fried chicken in a Styrofoam box? Why prefer these expensive earth destroying things over love and laughter with real people, and making real human music together with other human beings -- lifting our voices together, dancing and enjoying the world that was given to us? Absolutely for free.

And the answer is this: We suffer under a mass national hallucination. Americans, regardless of income or social position, now live in a culture entirely perceived inside a self-referential media hologram of a nation and world that does not exist. Our national reality is staged and held together by media, chiefly movie and television images. We live in a “theater state.”

In our theater state, we know the world through media productions which are edited and shaped to instruct us on how to look and behave and view the outside world. As in all staged productions and illusions, everyone we see is an actor. There are the television actors portraying what supposedly represents reality. Non-actors in Congress perform in front of the cameras, as the American empire’s cultural machinery weaves and spins out our cultural mythology.

Cultural myth production is an enormous industry in America. It is very similar to the national projects of pyramid-building in Egypt, or cathedral-building in medieval Europe. And in our obsession with violence and punishment, two characteristics of a consensual police state reality, we are certainly similar to prison camp building in Stalinist Russia. Actually, we’re pretty good in that department too. Consider that one fourth of all the incarcerated people on earth are in U.S. prisons. U.S. citizens imprisoned by their own government.

Good guys and bad guys at the chariot races

In any case, the media culture's production of martyrs, good guys and bad guys, fallen heroes and concept outlaws, is not just big corporate business. It is the armature of our cultural behavior. It tells us who to fear (Middle Eastern terrorists, Mr. Chavez in Venezuela, and foreign made pharmaceuticals), who to scorn (again the same candidates, along with Brittney Spears for her lousy child rearing skills). Our daily news is the modern version of Roman coliseum shows. Elections are personality combat, chariot races, not examinations of solutions being offered. None are offered.

What are being offered are monkey models. Man as a social animal necessarily mimics the behavior he sees around him, whether it be by real people or moving images of people. This eye-to-brain to mimicry connection does not care. Consequently, we know how to act and what the things around us are because television and media tell us. Television is the software, the operating instructions for our society. Thus, social realism for us is a television commercial for the American lifestyle: what's new to wear, what to eat, who's cool (Obama), what and whom to fear (that perennial evil booger, Castro) or who to admire (Bill Gates, pure American genius at work). This societal media software tells us what music our digitized corporate complex is selling, but you never see images of ordinary families sitting around in the evenings making music together, or creating songs of their own based upon their own lives and from their own hearts. Because that music cannot be bought and sold, and is not profitable. I think about that when the children and their parents sing and



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dance on the sand in front of my shack in Central America. We Americans are not offered that choice.

Managing mythology

So instead of a daily life in the flesh, belly to belly and soul to soul, lived out in the streets, and parks and public places, in love and the workplace, we get 40-inch televisions, YouTube, Cineplexes, and the myths spun out by Hollywood.

Now for a national mythology to work, it has to be accessible to everyone all the time, it has to be all in one bundle. For example, in North Korea, it is wrapped up in a single man, Kim. In America, as we have said, it is the media and Hollywood in particular. Hollywood accommodates Imperial myths, melting pot myths, and hegemonic military masculinity myths, and glamour myths. It articulates our culture's social imaginary: "the prevailing images a society needs to project about itself in order to maintain certain features of its organization." And the features of our media mythology are terrifying when you think about them.

As a writer friend says, It is watching "Man on Fire," with Denzel Washington's tragic pose and his truthful bullets, and his willingness to saw the fingers off of Mexicans to get the information on time to protect us from The Evil. It is the absorption of that electronic mythology that allowed us to co-sign the torture at Abu Ghraib.

Incidentally, speaking of Abu Ghraib, I am a friend of Ray Hardy, lawyer to Lynndie England, the leash girl of Abu Ghraib. He has copies of thousands of other, far more grisly Abu Ghraib photos. Believe me, they picked the gentlest ones to release. Anyway, when the media and government people in power made that selection, they were managing your con-

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sciousness. What you know and don't know. Keeping you calmer by withholding the truth. Rather like not upsetting little children so they will continue to quietly behave the way you want.

But, like children, the American public got bored with the subject of torture long ago, so we quit seeing the victims. Plenty of new evidence has been coming out for years since Lynndie's famous pics from Abu Ghraib. But the short American attention span, created by our rapid fire media, says, "Move on to the next hologram please. Whoa! Stop the remote. Nice butt shot of Sarah Palin there!"

The result is that Americans cannot achieve the cathexis we need. Cathexis is the ground zero psychic and emotional attachment to the world that cannot be argued. It is "beyond ideological challenge because it is called into existence affectively." Americans are conditioned to reject any affective attachment that does not have a happy ending. And in that, we remain mostly a nation of children. We never get to grow up.

So we tell ourselves the Little Golden Book fairy tales -- that we are a great and compassionate people, and that we are personally innocent of any of our government's horrific crimes abroad. Guiltless as individuals. And we do remain innocent, in a sense, as long as we cannot see beyond the media hologram. But it is a terrible kind of self-inflicted innocence that can come to no good. We are a nation latch key kids babysat by an electronic hallucination, the national hologram.

The TV goldfish bowl

You may or may not watch much television, but the average American spends almost one-third of his or her waking life doing so. The neurological implications of this are so profound that they cannot



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even be comprehended in words, much less described by them. Television constitutes our reality in the same fashion that water constitutes the environment in a goldfish bowl. It's everywhere and affects everything, even when we are not watching it. Television regulates our national perceptions and our interior ideations of who we Americans are. It schedules our cultural illusions of choice. It pre-selects candidates in our elections. By the way, as much as I like Obama, I fully understand he is there because he was selected by the illusion producing machinery of television, and citizens under its influence. It is hard to underestimate the strength of these illusions.

TV regulates holiday marketing opportunities and the national neurological seasons. It tells us, "It's Christmas! Time to shop!" Or "it's election season, time to vote." Or "it's football season, let us rally passions and buy beer and cheer." Or that America's major deity, "The Economy," is suffering badly. "Sacred temples on Wall Street make great sickness upon the land!" Or most ominous of all, "It's time to make war! Again."

It is fair to say that television and the American culture are the same thing. More than any other factor, it is the glue of society and the mediator of our experience. American culture is stone cold dead without it. If all the TVs in America went black, so would most of America's collective consciousness and knowledge. Because corporate media have replaced nearly all other previous forms of accumulated knowledge.

Especially the ancient forms, such as contemplation of the natural world, study and care of the soul. And I do not mean soul in the religious sense either. I mean the deeper self, the one you go to sleep with every night.

The media have colonized our inner lives like a virus. The virus is not going away. This commoditization of our human consciousness is probably the most astounding, most chilling accomplishment of American capitalist culture.

Escape from the zombie food court

Capitalist society however, can only survive by defying the laws of thermodynamics, through endlessly expanding growth, buying and using more of everything, every year and forever. Thus the cult of radical consumerism. It has been the deadliest cult of all because, so far, it has always triumphed, and has now spread around the earth and its nations.

Why has it been so viral, so attractive to so many for so long? How did it come to grip the consciousness of so much of mankind, from Beijing to Bangladesh? Thuggish enforcement accounts for part of it, of course. But it has succeeded too because it requires no effort. No critical thinking. Not even literacy. Just passive consumption. That the easy addiction to consumption is probably hard wired into us. Every one of us will go right out this door tonight and continue to play out our lives as contributors to ecocide and global warming, mainly because it's easier. And besides, we are not offered any other real options, and we don't know any other way. Nor can we ever know any other way without making a great effort.

How to make that effort? (Assuming you even want to.) As we said, consuming images, goods or buying your identity at Old Navy or a retro clothing shop takes no real effort or thought. Just money. Text messaging your whereabouts at the mall may be a technological wonder, but you're still absolutely nowhere if you are just one more oral grooved organism in the food court at the mall moving in a



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swarm toward Quiznos.

So how do you escape the programming of the food court, and, I might include, escape even those parts of this school that may serve more to indoctrinate than enlighten you? All pedagogy, even the best, is nevertheless about control. How does one escape such a total system?

In a word, service. Humble and thoughtful service to the world. It is heartening that we do have concerned Americans studying to alleviate the great suffering of so much of humanity. I have no proof of it, but it seems like earnest idealism is making a comeback since its decline following the optimistic 1960s. People and institutions such as this one are attempting to move American society forward again, heal us of our national sickness to the extent you can, after decades of regression, not to mention repression. Of course, to solve problems you must first identify them.

Let me say here that one of the most profound things I have learned from the Third World, perhaps the only thing I have learned, and as psychologists you've surely heard it before, is this: The diagnosis is not the disease. Which is why our prescribed treatment never seems to work in places like Africa. Or even in the Bronx or South Philly.

Even our most well intentioned thinking and study of the afflictions of Africa and Latin America, American inner cities or Appalachia, suffers from hubris, because they are necessarily the products of western propertized and monetized thinking that cause the problem. So now we study our victims with great piety. And supposedly teach them solutions to the problems we continue to cause for them. Western people studying globalization's horrific effects, or rape in Africa,

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or world poverty are doing so under the assumption that such things can be dealt with through some social mechanistic means, through analysis and unbiased reason and rational value-free science. Or by a network of officially sanctioned agencies.

For years I have wanted to see the opposite take place. To see well fed, educated Americans learn from the poor of the earth. Do what Gandhi advised, let the poor be the teachers. Go among them with nothing, one set of clothing and no money, keep your mouth shut, and do your best not to affect anything (which is impossible, I know. But you can come, as they say, “close enough for government work.”)

Then just let the world happen to you, like they do in the so-called “passive societies,” instead of trying to happen to it in typical Western fashion. Not trying to “improve” things. Maybe practice milpa agriculture with Mayans on the Guatemalan border, watching corn grow for three months. Fish in a lonely dugout, sun-up to sun-down, in the dying reefs of the Caribbean, with only a meal or two of fish as your reward. Do such things for a month or two.

First you will experience boredom, then comes an internal psychic violence and anger, much like the experience of zazen, or sitting meditation, as the layers of your mind conditioning peel away. Don't quit, keep at it, endure it, to the end. And when you return you will find that deeply experiencing a non-conditioned reality changes things forever. What you have experienced will animate whatever intellectual life you have developed. Or negate much of it. But in serious, intelligent people, experiencing non-manufactured reality usually gives lifelong meaning and insight to the work. You will



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have experienced the eternal verities of the world and mankind at ground zero. And you will find that the healthy social structures our well intentioned Western minds seek are already inherent in the psyche of mankind, but imprisoned. And the startling realization that you and I are the unknowing captors.

In conclusion, I would point out that the high technological imprisonment of our consciousness has been fairly recent. There are still those among us who remember when it was not so entrapped. A few of us still know what it was like to experience non-manufactured realities -- life outside our mass produced kitsch culture. Particularly some aging Sixties types, who sought to pass through the doors of perception. Many made it through. But in my travels to places such as this one, I also meet a new breed of younger people, who get it completely. I meet them in the more advanced psychological venues such as Adler. And especially in the ecological movement.

They seem to already know what it took me a lifetime to learn: that each of us is but one strand in the vast organic web of flesh and blood chlorophyll. All things and all beings are inextricably connected at the most profound level. Any physicist will confirm this. We are bound by its every wave and particle, all of us -- the lonely night clerk at Motel 6 and the leviathans of the deep, the sleeping grandmother in New Haven, Connecticut and the maimed Iraqi child in Kirkuk. It can be understood by anyone though, simply by owning one's own consciousness. And in doing so we find that ownership and domination are both temporary and meaningless. And that the animating spirit of the earth is real and within us and claimable.

The purpose of life is to know this.

JOE BAGEANT

Einstein glimpsed it. Lao-Tzu knew it. So did St. Francis. But you and I are not supposed to. It would shatter the revered, digitized, super-sized, utterly meaningless hologram. The one that mesmerizes us, and mediates our every experience, but isolates us from universal humanness and its coursing energies. Such as love. Or mercy. Compassion. Existential pain. Hunger. Or the unmitigated joy of simply being alive one finds in children everywhere, even among the poorest. Most of the human race still lives in that realm.



**On a clear day if
I squint real hard
I can see down
that road ahead**

Blessed is the one who joins them. Because he or she learns that the truth is not relative, and that because the human mind seeks balance, social justice is not only inescapable in the long run, but inevitable. I won't be around for that, but on a clear day if I squint real hard I can see down that road ahead. And on that road I can see the long chain of decent human beings like yourselves walking toward the light. And for your very presence on this earth and in this room, I am grateful. Thank you.

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