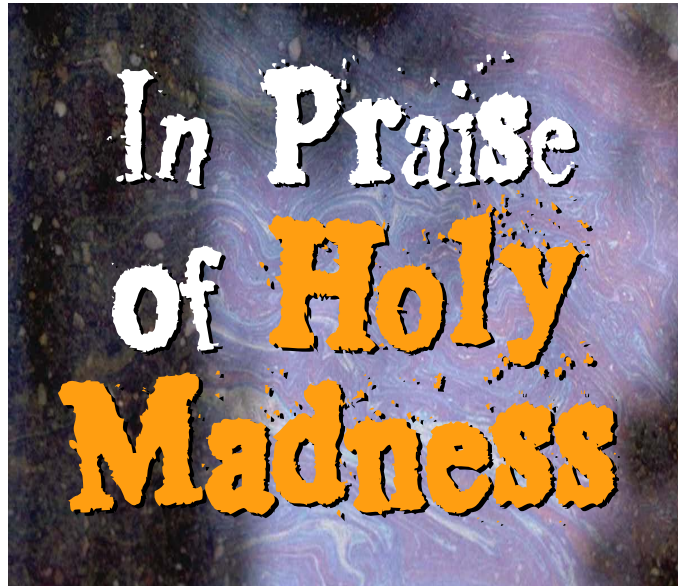




In **P**raise  
of **Holy**  
**Madness**

Joe Bageant



**JOE BAGEANT**

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# One

mark of our soulless New American Century is the lack of respect for saintly madmen. By that I mean holy seers of the Blakean-Coleridge stripe that could be found on America's streets as recently as the hippy era. The kind of crazy adept and enlightened iconoclasts honored by Allen Ginsberg and the beats, holy foolishness in the tradition of Saint Simeon with the dead dog tied to his waist and throwing nuts at the congregation, or Tibetan lama *myonpas* and India's *avadhutas*. Perhaps such holy madmen are still out there among the homeless and the crack whores. Maybe there are legions of Zen alcoholics and the like, and maybe we have lost the ability to see them in this season of imperial hubris, consumer fatigue and existential numbness. But I don't think so. I know crazy wisdom and saintly madness in men's eyes when I see it, and I am not seeing it very often in America these days. It has been outlawed by the Republicans and soundly condemned as Devil's work by the Christian Right.

Of course if the dear reader believes science defines all reality and that men possess no spiritual aspect, then it might be best to go out for a beer, because I am of the opposite disposition. So much so that I am convinced things like grace really exist and that mankind is so murderously full of shit because it cannot apply itself to higher laws – laws which must be called spiritual for lack of a better term.

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Having cleared the air between you and me, (assuming you're still reading) let me tell you about a rare saintly madman I laid eyes and heart upon recently. He is presently eating very expensive pies and watching television with his dogs in his own personal hell out in Etowah, Tennessee, the former "Rubberized Hair Capitol of the World."

### **At home in hell**

For the past two days, Bob Dealy has lain stupefied in his chlordane insecticide soaked house in Etowah, alternating between near coma and an electrifying terror of opening his mail or answering the phone. Chlordane poisoning has destroyed his nervous system, rendered him freakish and weird, and in his own words "with an agonized countenance, a bony 'horn' growing out of the middle of my forehead, strange disoriented behavior, and fat. I didn't get old. I got killed." And on it goes... "I took my dogs to the vet last week where 'substance abuse' on my part was suspected," he tells me. "Once I got locked out of my car, and the police took me in for drug testing. I'm used to the horror of it all. I noticed in one of your columns that you were struggling to remain objective after watching a video beheading. That's my life. Early on, I got this "view of things." I keep asking myself, "Why would I, of all people, know these things?" I have alienated all my friends and relatives. My closest acquaintances know NOTHING about me. And the question lingers always: "Why would I, of all people, know these things? Am I just crazy?"

Home for Bob Dealy is a sprawling old Victorian ruin on an entire city block, complete with fountains and lighted gardens, with more white fence than the state of Kentucky, covered parking for 10 cars and paved parking for another 20. This is the materialist nightmare of his late father who was raised in a boxcar and obsessed with the American Dream. He advised his wife, in the event of his death, to move immediately "or be ruined financially." The old man died twenty years ago and his admonishment has become prophecy. The place is a money trap beyond anything yet known, and as Bob carries pills to his 90-plus-year-old mother between his own attacks of chlordane poisoning, she loudly refuses to move, despite the roofs and the floors and the ongoing disasters. Now everything's gone but her small pension and health insurance. The roof is shot, furniture, rare books and carpets ruined by rain long ago. So Bob Dealy spends his days amidst buckets and pans full of water watch-

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ing videos and eating expensive Edwards pies:

*Joe, as you probably know, a Christian company cooks those Edwards pies, and they are – to my taste – decadent. Next to a really good orgasm (the once-in-five-years kind), the Turtle Pie, or Key Lime or Lemon ... well, it's not something that should be discussed in decent company. One of Edwards' likeable things, in addition to the pies, is what they call "personality pans". There's a Bible verse embossed in the aluminum under the pie. Surprise! "God is love" "All good things come to him who waits" "Do unto others..." Nothing heavy, just fun wholesome Bible verses. Anyway, I was eating my pie, eagerly anticipating the happy moment when the Bible verse would be revealed. As I pushed aside the last lump of gooey lime and lard, there it was, one of those "jaw on the floor moments" (still scraping)... **"He who will not work, let him not eat!"***

*STARVE THE MOTHERFUCKER! Implicit in this is everything I despise, the assumption that the poor are worthless scum and "won't work", blah. It's about money, taxes... It's about corporations. And it's embossed onto the bottom of a \$10 pie (as opposed to a \$2 pie, if you get my point) The spirit of the moment, after eating a pie with enough calories to restore all the starving children in Calcutta, was another right-wing "FUCK YOU" in the name of the Lord. IT'S THOSE FUCKING POOR PEOPLE, GOD DAMMIT.*

As to the videos, Bob has made an intense study of Oliver Stone's 1990 ABC TV miniseries, *Wild Palms*, which he deems prophetic. Set in 2006, *Wild Palms* begins, with a nightmare, a rhinoceros in an empty swimming pool, symbolizing "the beast in place of the baptism," Bob asserts. "The hero runs inside to the screams of his children where, if you look closely, a shadow forms a distinct cross on their bedroom door from which hideous screams emerge. It is about media manipulation, especially through television. Corporations are running wild and their goon squads are beating the uncooperative; torture is discussed and executed by children. There has been a 'synthetic terrorist attack' which gave the police 'broad new powers.' I think it is damned weird that *Wild Palms* was so correct right down to the specific year. All cultures have their own prophets that are every bit as important as those in the Bible, but the prophet of course is never recognized in his own time."

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### Agonizing divinity

The first time I experienced a human window into “something other” was in 1972 with hipster holy man Stephen Gaskin. At one point it was very clear that he was experiencing samadhi, the nature of which could be glimpsed. Another time was the birth of my children, that moment when the infant opens its eyes briefly and gives you that unearthly glance of recognition, and the whole room is filled with a funky penetrating electricity that literally smells like the flesh being made holy ... as the kid’s eyes give off a flash that says, “Yes we know each other and always will across space and eternity.”

But there is also the terrible anxious look of the sadhu of the ghats, the madman, and others connected to that same eternity from which the baby’s consciousness flashed. I have seen far more of this than the blissful kind, which should probably tell me something about the nature of things. Sometimes it is the ecstasy in a Hare Krishna’s eyes, other times it is the look of the universal agony of existence, the sort to which we respond when we behold a legless beggar in Varanasi, India or a homeless schizophrenic in Washington D.C. or Scranton. Agony/divinity. About the worst news I ever got from the pursuit of these things was that enlightenment and truth are all suffering and no bliss, which was always point. There is no free prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box. Just increased consciousness of the world’s suffering. Anyway, when Bob sent me an email, that practically jumped off the screen with its wonderful feverishness, I suspected I was about to meet another mad adept, or maybe just a madman, either of which prospect always delights me.

### Rubber hair transfiguration

As to Etowah being the Rubberized Hair Capitol, he says:

*“When I was young, my home town Etowah was the rubberized hair capitol of the world. There was a BIG sign at the city limit informing travelers of that dubious horror/honor. The stuff was bright green. It was hog hair coated with stiff, green rubber. People actually did that for a living - they did that with their lives. Then came the Eighties and the hair plant closed down. All those deaths and maimings on the loading platform of the rubberized hair plant rendered pointless. A few of the dis-*

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*membered and widowed collected big settlements from the railroad or the plant but, usually, they spent it all frivolously and now live in penury - but with some stories to tell. The richest people in town, the rubberized hair barons, went bankrupt and their family estate is now a Rodeway Inn and McDonalds. Spooky transfigurations took place. The carcasses of abandoned textile mills have been turned into what might loosely be called "outlets," cavernous holes simply DUMPED full of discarded, outdated, broken merchandise. When I say, "DUMPED", I mean, "DUMPED". It is piled up on the floor, sometimes to the ceiling. Much caution is required when walking through lest one be crushed under shifting/falling merchandise. I'm not kidding. Now if you venture far enough back into one of these monstrosities - and down, down, into the belly - you will find amidst the crumbling, raw subterranean concrete and filthy molded block and exposed, termite eaten wood... suddenly a gleaming modern glass facade and, behind it, luxurious big-city-like air-conditioned offices where well-dressed people seem to be doing something useful while sitting on polished chrome and leather furniture with fake Motherwells and Pollocks on the wall. It's just fucking weird...*

### **Deepak Chopra, get a job!**

East and West, for the most part religion is synonymous with fraud, with the Pope, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and our president's phony religious values being the icing on the Christian cake of our times. Bob Dealy sees the same things in the low-fat spiritual icons of the left and the New Agers:

*How has Deepak Chopra managed to express such Republican conservative values with no criticism whatsoever from the left? Chopra is the ultimate example of the wolf in sheep's clothing, a denizen of Oprah, and a spiritual guru for the superficial, self-serving rich in a miserable, dying world. Listen to him carefully. It's the Benny Hinn/Robert Tilton/Creflo Dollar "gospel of prosperity". (If you're poor, you're ungodly, and you got what you deserve. God prospers his people.) Chopra states overtly that material success is directly related to spiritual attainment. Oh, really? It would be news to Christ and Buddha.*

*I will concede the poor are spiritually bankrupt, but no more so than the rich. No more so than the many monasteries and religious communities I have visited. IT'S ALL*



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OF US (on the other hand, the left seems to think the poor are all saints by virtue of their poverty. And I DO think the poor have a more valid excuse for their crimes.) Then Chopra drives in the stake, decrying “throwing money at social problems” and she says, “where you see poverty it is the expression of a deeper impoverishment - the soul, the spirit screaming for nourishment”. Conspicuous by its absence from Chopra's words is any mention of integrity, ethics, morals, self-sacrifice, commitment, and renunciation. The message, essentially, is, “FUCK YOU! GET A JOB!” Another rhetorical point scored for General Motors and Phillips Petroleum. God comes home to the Wall Street Journal. But this IS America, where everybody is a businessman and Chopra makes his pitch with that sweet, smiling, gentle face reminiscent of Ted Bundy. Chopra's place is in Beverly Hills telling rich people what they want to hear – for money. And will Chopra read this, sneak in while I'm asleep and beat me to death with \$150 ayurvedic bars of soap in one of his Versace silk stockings?

### Trim your beard

“If the scissors are not used daily on the beard, it will not be long before the beard, by its luxuriant growth, is pretending to be the head.” – Sufi mystic Nur ad-Din Abd ar-Rahman Jam

Joe, it is all about the center. Getting away from the destructive, divisive periphery (the beard growing out of control, ritual, dogma, concepts, arguments) and right to the universal core germinal point (the face behind the beard, out of which the beard grows) “from within which all religion arises and back to which, ideally, it should lead us.” When I occasionally pass through center while on my way from one periphery to another, IT IS HEAVEN. But today it is warm and raining. The chlordane is reeking. I am having much trouble now, especially opening the mail. Still, those who have been to the center, who have at least perceived, if only for a moment, the face behind the beard, have a responsibility to be critical of those who remain at the periphery with their beards growing out of control.

Meanwhile, the sheer carnage of our terrible national enterprise is staggering! Yet no one mentions the back rooms of research facilities filled with mutilated tortured beings kept alive for study or force-fed Drano to see how long it takes fifty-percent of them to die. I am always astonished at how very few people know what



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goes on in medical and corporate research labs, not to mention the meat industry. "For every action... " It's the nature of reality. It's physics. There will be a reckoning for the culture that creates a holocaust of that magnitude. The fact that there is something terribly wrong with ANYONE who does such a thing, and that this same "lack" will therefore affect EVERYTHING he/she does, eventually creating magnificently awful problems. Elevating carnage to cultural protocol is very dangerous. And official rationalization of it is disastrous. Why isn't someone talking about these things?" We have no examples. We have no ideals. We have only corruption and self-justifying silliness in service of capitalism as it runs further and more terribly amok.

### A lamp unto the left

And to the forces on the left trying to combat all this I say: The realization IS compassion." "Consciousness" and "heart" arise together. They are one thing. The compassionate try to help even their most despicable brothers. That's why it is written: "Without love, I am nothing. Yet the left throws it all away. Though the left is so often correct in principle, it becomes merely the other side of that one counterfeit coin we have been offered. True spirituality is the answer. Therefore, I say to the left, "don't throw religion away; find out what it's about". And intelligent smug people on the left will answer, "There is no God!" Yet that statement is unperceptive, pointless and offensive.

Be compassionate, but be careful. I saw a fighter pilot on the 700 Club who described what sounded like an homoerotic orgasm experienced while shooting down some enemy planes killing the pilots. He interpreted the rush of killing them as "finding God". God had visited him there in the cockpit. But he and Danuta talked glowingly about it. We have to be careful around these people. Very careful.

Anyhooooo... It is raining tonight and right now I am finishing off my liver with orange soda and vodka. The wind is blowing so hard there'll be no roof left tomorrow. And to that I offer a hearty, "GOOD FUCKING RIDDANCE!" Last night I was getting together my mother's "next-day's" medicine – her prescriptions and other pills. But I forgot what I was doing, drew a glass of water and took them myself. HA! THERE'S NO HOPE! I have a case of beer and a pizza, so LOOK OUT, MOMMA!

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*And so this is all very surprising to me – in fact, shocking – what you are doing. Respecting me like this. I'm a little scared you'll find out who and what I really am. Nobody has ever taken me seriously. All my words are a humble attempt to point at the moon. Like the Buddha said, "my teaching is a finger pointing to the moon, but all of you are looking at my finger." Of course, the finger pointing to the moon is analogous to "trimming one's beard"... the teaching, the teacher, the ritual, the dogma, the practice, language, even the concept of "god" ... all of that is also the beard which "grows out" of the face and obscures it. Trim it daily.*

Now I ask you this: What do you call the opposite of *someone* who is out of his mind? A poet? A divine monster? We do not much acknowledge horror in this country, except the petty stage-managed kind for which we have developed such an appetite, such as Terri Schiavo's morbid gurgling, etc. Yet none of it comes close to the type of horror and grandeur that's lacking in our life, the kind from which we flee, such as our own graves or the sight of the things we do to sentient others so long as they are poor, voiceless, out of sight, or perhaps have four legs. And even then, the only way we can keep up the ghastly charade is by deeming the saints amid us as madmen, and anointing the truly depraved among us kings, avoiding at all costs our divine monsters.

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