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Bern Porter
Sheila Holtz

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A YEAR LATER

Notes on America's intimations of mortality

By Mark Slouka

All national stories privilege myth over hard fact, just as, to some extent, all personal ones do; few nations, however, have succeeded in erasing the hard facts of history as successfully, as utterly, as we have. But the empire of facts will have its say, eventually. Although Octavio Paz may have been right when he suggested that Americans have always preferred to use reality rather than to know it, we may yet have that acquaintance forced upon us.

Reality, of course, was not a fit subject this past year; we were a nation in crisis and had little patience for such frippery. Those who harbored notions of introducing it into the national debate, therefore, wisely held back and let the mythmakers have their day. But that day has passed. The storm of grief and fury has begun to abate, the patriotic surge, like the popularity of Osama bin Laden toilet paper, to recede. It may be time.

The spirit of pain is archaeological: It strips away—whether by brush or by pick—the layers of wishful thinking accumulated during times of peace. It scours and flays. It is by nature atavistic. At its best (unless it cuts too deep, comes too close) it can reveal the essential self, buried under a thin soil of misperceptions.

It seems almost trite to say it: Whatever else last September's events have done, they have forced on us—or will, eventually—a revolution in seeing. It will take time to understand what we have been shown; as of yet, the work of re-vision has hardly begun. Still, a few facts seem to be taking shape. A few truths, even. The first is that, despite the muzzy pap of the globalists, who never tire of limning their vision of a borderless, friction-free world, we remain strikingly—even shockingly—tribal. The second is that the source of this tribal identity—the three-century-old myth of American exceptionalism—is alive and well. And not just alive and well but ruddy-cheeked and thriving. Quieted for a time by prosperity, it has revived under stress.
The third, more troubling, has to do with what that prosperity— that long, sweet slumber— has done to us, and by us. I mean the so-called baby-boom generation of which I am a part. Indulged by history as perhaps no generation has ever been indulged, heretofore largely excused from attendance, we've responded to our wake-up call with an odd and often unadmirable mix of jingoistic bluster and domestic capitulation. Sensing an opportunity, the Christian soldiers of our administration have tucked behind the banner of our righteousness and are marching as to war (a real war, this time), Colin Powell flapping like a small, decorative banner in the wind.

But let me be clear. I am not interested in anatomizing the current administration's modus operandi: its made-for-TV bellicosity, its positively Reaganesque oversimplifications, its ever increasing arrogance. I'm a novelist, not a policy wonk. I'm less interested in our unselected representatives' predictable willingness to capitalize on our confusion than I am in the source of that confusion. Why? Because I sense something there, something not visible perhaps to those blinkered by empiricism (even the soft-shelled empiricism of the social sciences), something so large and amorphous that the radar of the pollsters cannot detect it— less a historical truth than a broadly cultural, intuitive one. I believe, to put it plainly, that last year's attack was so traumatic to our age-old denial of our chosen community. We had denied him his due— his graveyards, watered down his deeds, buried him with things. Yet somehow, so successfully erased, was standing behind the banner of our righteousness and are marching as to war (a real war, this time), Colin Powell flapping like a small, decorative banner in the wind.

ONE NATION, UNDER GOD

Some years ago, at the University of California, San Diego, a young woman raised her hand in the middle of a seminar I was then teaching on the first century of Rome and the dawn of the Christian Era. She seemed genuinely disturbed by something. "I know you're all going to think this is crazy," she said, "but I always thought Jesus was an American."

A lovely moment. What she had articulated, as succinctly as I had ever heard it articulated, was the spirit behind three and a half centuries of American history. America as an elect nation, the world-redeeming ark of Christ, chosen, above all the nations of the world, for a special dispensation. What she had expressed, with an almost poetic compaction, was the core myth of America. Had John Winthrop been sitting at the table with us that foggy day in La Jolla, he would have understood what she was saying, and approved of it. As would Harriet Beecher Stowe. And Ronald Reagan. And, apparently, Attorney General John Ashcroft.

Stowe herself had made it all admirably clear in 1854. "The whole world," she wrote, in words notable for their lack of originality, "has been looking towards America with hope, as a nation specially raised up by God to advance a cause of liberty and religion." Others, from Henry David Thoreau to the evangelists of the Third Great Awakening, expressed the idea geographically, blending sacred and secular history, superimposing the religious metaphor over the actual land: America was bounded to the north by Canada, to the south by Mexico, to the East by Eden, and to the West by the Millennium. History moved from east to west. We had escaped fallen Egypt, crossed the sea, reinvented ourselves in the New World wilderness. Chosen for a special covenant with God, we would be "as a City upon a Hill," to recall both John Winthrop's sermon aboard the Arbella in 1630 and Ronald Reagan's inaugural address from 1981. Inevitably, it was understood (is still understood), the westward-tending tides of Manifest Destiny would carry us on till the ship of state ground ashore on the pebbles of paradise.

I had occasion to recall all this more than once last fall. I remembered it when I read that the sales of millennial tracts across the nation were going through the roof because, according to biblical prophesy, the last days were to be preceded by great sorrow (as though only our sorrow would weigh in the record), when educated friends explained to me, with a kind of tragic gusto, that their entire worldview had been convulsed by the tragedy (and implied that it was vaguely un-American of me that mine had not), when a minister acquaintance confessed to undergoing a crisis of faith so severe that he was considering leaving the Church.

When I wondered aloud to another acquaintance how it was possible for a man's faith to sail over Auschwitz, say, only to founder on the World Trade Center, I found myself quickly taken to task for both my myopia and my callousness— the product, he implied, of my excessively European sensibility. He himself had been in a state of crisis for two months, he said. He slept badly, struggled with depression. His children were afraid to get in the subway or walk past a tall building, and there was nothing he could tell them. He was considering leaving New York and moving to Mexico. "How can you not see that everything is different now?" he concluded. "And anyway, who are you to decide when it's right for someone to have a crisis of faith?"

The answer to the second question was easy enough: no one, though I did reserve the right to wonder at the minister's timing, or where his faith might have been hiding when half a million human beings were being massacred in Rwanda, not a few of them in churches. But the first had me stumped. Simply put, I did not believe that everything was different now, particularly not in the ontological sense in which my friend intended it. Nor did I understand his apparent eagerness to proclaim it so.

Everywhere I turned that eerily cloudless, almost crystalline September, I encountered a similar dissonance. A few days after the attack, for example, Auden's "September 1, 1939" had blossomed in the vast, virtual fields of the Web.

Facies along the bar,
Cling to their average day;
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fact assume
The furniture of home;
Let us see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

Even on the most superficial level, Auden's poem struck me as uniquely unsuited to the times. Rather than clinging to our average day, we seemed to be fairly trampling one another in our haste to assert that nothing would ever be average again, that the lights had, indeed, gone out and our homes become a haunted wood. Art? Music? Please. Colleagues in the School of the Arts where I teach (few writers, interestingly enough)
seemed prepared to duel for the opportunity to testify to the Frivolity of Art in Times like These. "It all feels so absurd," one said to me, referring to his own work. "What's the point?"

To which I couldn't answer, any more than I could have answered if he had been arguing the redundancy of beauty, or breathing. What could I say? That in June of 1945, workers reclaiming the Reich's prisons in Moravia had found poems, folded into thick squares, stuffed up into the electrical wiring? Or that it seemed curious to me that a person locked in a cell, awaiting interrogation or death, would choose to write a poem on a piece of toilet paper, while another, arguably as safe as any human being has ever been in this world, would come to see art as a kind of decorative garnish, a sprig of parsley on the cultural plate? Should I have pointed out, perhaps, that art had always been an act of affirmation and resistance, that, by its very complexity, worked against the shameful reductivism of fear, or that to believe otherwise was a luxury only the truly swaddled could afford? No, this seemed too obvious. Something else was at work here. I didn't understand it.

I understood it no more than I understood the poster that had appeared the week of the attack in a store on my corner bearing the slogan "Never, never, never, never, never give up!" "Give up what?" I wanted to ask the sober crowds on Broadway. "To whom?" A horrible thing had occurred, certainly. And those directly affected by the tragedy, like all victims of unspeakable thrust—like the mother of the teenager killed in a traffic accident the afternoon of the eleventh—deserved all of our compassion. But this was not London during the Blitz, or Stalingrad in the winter of 1943, or Sarajevo in 1994. Thousands of innocent people had died, true. But innocents had been dying for a while now—millions of them, mostly children, as quietly as melting snow each and every year. Surely we didn't think that just because...

Ah, but we did. How else to explain it? In our national heart of hearts, just below the global crust (with its multi- and poly- and inter- prefixes), the conviction that we were different, apart, a City upon a hill, remained untouched. Why was this "the biggest news event in the history of the world" (my own, stunned italics), as the administration of New York's prestigious Stuyvesant High School told its students, Simple! Because it had happened here. To us. And, lest we forget, we Americans had been commissioned by God himself to bear the light of liberty and religion throughout all the earth. Rwanda? Bosnia? Couldn't help but feel sorry for those folks, but let's face it: Rwanda did not have a covenant with God. And Jesus was not a Sarajevo.

Hardly anyone outside the tattered fringe of the religious far right would have articulated it so bluntly, of course. And yet the fact remained: Although the specifically Christian foundation of American exceptionalism had been largely buried by the years, the self-conception built upon it—however secularized and given over to mammon—remained intact. Our tragedy had exposed it, laid it bare, and torn it badly. Now I understood how we had managed to endure the slow disintegration of Bosnia with such fortitude: we had simply filed it, along with the events in Rwanda and Chechnya and Sierra Leone, under the rubric "Bad Things That Occur to People Who Are Not Americans." We sought, on the whole, capable of bearing untold amounts of other people's pain and very little of our own. My brother-in-law's jokes about the famine in Ethiopia had been making the rounds before the dying there was even properly under way, by the summer of 2002, he had not told me a single World Trade Center joke. Humor, I realized, clearly had its limits—or borders, more precisely. The tribe still came first.

So much for globalization. What bothered me, however, was not so much the bald fact of our tribalism (which I found natural and excusable as the hypocrisy with which we had denied it. What troubled me, specifically, was the kind of Benetton tokenism that allowed us to parade our global sympathies because we had eaten in a Sudanese restaurant last week, or featured a woman from Senegal in one of our ads. If we were going to weep for the victims of the attack on the World Trade Center and not for the dead of Srebrenica, it seemed to me, then we should have the courage to admit where the frontiers of our allegiance lay.

How close, exactly, did tragedy have to come for us to bleed? Did we have to smell the smoke to have our imagination and our compassion activated? Did the victims have to be American? Or speak English? Was that enough? Or did they, perhaps, have to look like us as well? Was it possible, in other words, just possible, that our reaction to the tragedy was not wholly about those who had died—whom 99.9 percent of us had never known anyway—but about us? That what moved us, finally, what woke us up to the fact that people had died—unexpectedly and tragically—was the uncomfortable thought that we might? It was a bit of a shock. Here in America, under the protective eye of Jesus, we could die. Now that was worth a crisis of faith.

Let me be as clear as possible here: I have no wish to be misunderstood. I believe that in this hyperbole-driven age, when the word "heroism" has been devalued to the point that men are deemed worthy of it simply for not abandoning their families, or for effectively slamming a leather ball with a stick, September 11 showed us not one but multiple examples of the real thing, unadulterated and potent and pure. In the last few moments, as the terrified crowds were streaming down the stairwells of the World Trade Center, men were running up, determined, in their minutes of allotted time, to save as many as possible. Ordinary human beings risked their lives (and, more than this, the unspeakable pain of those who loved them) to help others. This cannot be reduced, or contextualized. It can only be acknowledged, humbly, and perhaps with some bit of pride that this too our species is capable of.

This I believe. I believe as well, however, that a legitimate distinction can be made between those who, in one way or another, were directly touched by the tragedy and those, like myself, who were not. Who were never in any real danger. Who never missed a meal. The former are exempt from criticism. The latter are not. The former deserve either our reverence or our compassion. The rest of us merit neither, automatically. Courage, in general, is directly proportional to actual risk. Those who touched by the tragedy and those, like myself, who were not. Who were never in any real danger. Who never missed a meal. The former are exempt from criticism. The latter are not. The former deserve either our reverence or our compassion. The rest of us merit neither, automatically. Courage, in general, is directly proportional to actual risk. Those who...
But that was not the real news. He had it “on good authority,” from a friend connected to the New Jersey Department of Education, that “they” had kept their children out of school on the morning of September 11. Hard to believe? Sure. But records don’t lie. And a nearly 100 percent absence rate allowed for only one conclusion: They had known. All of them.

I’m ashamed to say that, taken by surprise, and momentarily hamstrung by our friendship (this was a decent man I was talking to), I said little at the time beyond a few general expressions of disbelief, and thereby contributed, in some small way, to the proliferation of that idiocy. As is so often the case, I thought of a great many things to say after I’d hung up the phone. How, I might have asked (overlooking the patent absurdity of the entire accusation for a moment), were Muslim children identified on the school rosters in New Jersey? And were the political sympathies of their parents evident from their surnames? And why, if they were all in on the plot, and knew, therefore, that the planes would hit lower Manhattan, did they keep their children out of schools in New Jersey, for God’s sake? And what of the wives and husbands and children of the Muslims who had died in the attack? And wasn’t it a miracle on the order of the loaves and the fishes that this plot, so tightly controlled that it had slipped past the porous but still formidable radar of the information-gathering services of the United States government, had been common knowledge among twenty or thirty or fifty thousand Muslims, none of whom had let slip a word until the deed was done and they were getting into the cab, bound for JFK?

To our considerable credit, this brand of clumsy scapegoating (which might easily have gained in strength and virulence in a less heterogeneous society) quickly died. Which should have been the end of it. It wasn’t. Lacking a convenient coven of witches to burn, disoriented by the fluttering of American flags, we simply jumped two steps up the conjugation and transferred the locus of our suffering from “them” to “us.” We began to pummel ourselves. Life as we had known it was now effectively over, we declared. Nothing would ever be the same again. The ship of state was taking water. Best, therefore, to throw a few civil liberties overboard. Captain Ashcroft said so.

This eagerness to punish ourselves, it seemed to me, to drag ourselves about in an ecstasy of suffering, would have been more explicable, more typically American, had it been coupled with some redeeming notion of our own sin. Throughout much of our history, after all, when hard times had hit, we had turned inward, assuming that the fault was ours and that we were being punished. Castigating ourselves for our shortcomings, we would flog ourselves into righteousness, thereby renewing our covenant with God and, by extension, the promise of America.

But this was something different. We felt as pure as the lamb. We had been struck for no reason. How could God do this to us? The result was a cultural mutation—a half jeremiad. Self-flagellation without self-scrutiny. Suffering without the need or capacity for atonement. We still flogged ourselves (we had that part down) but without quite knowing why.2

Which is not to suggest that the old rituals had lost their power, only their ability to make us uncomfortable by suggesting that we were somehow complicit in our fate. Although shorn of its reflexive element (any mention of our own role in this, was, quite simply, verboten), the jeremiad...

2 Robert J. Tamasy, writing in to USA Today after the recent furor over the Pledge of Allegiance, was the exception. Noting that “Our nation is hurting deeply” in the aftermath of September 11, he went on, like any minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, to assume that we had somehow been backsliding as a nation, and therefore should seek atonement for our sins. “Instead of seeking ways of removing God from everyday discourse,” he wrote, “it might be better to consider the admonition of 2 Chronicles 7:14, ‘If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.’”
ad’s power as a form of jingoistic exhortation and national renewal remained undiminished. Just as earlier crises—from colonial famine to the Civil War—had been quickly folded into the rhetoric of America’s mission, so in 2001. The enfolding, of course, was slightly different now. Less than forty-eight hours after the attack, commemorative T-shirts and postcards were already for sale on the corner of Spring Street. From WTC chocolate bars to personal alarm systems (“Because, in trying times like these, one can’t be too careful”) to Estée Lauder’s “America the Beautiful” compacts (with Austrian crystals for stars), the marketplace did its work: blurring the edges, dulling the pain, melding everything into the familiar lingo of dollars and cents. We felt better. History was once again back on the reservation. America was open for business. Evil would be punished, as our commander in chief assured us, though we would have to sign a very large check, and do exactly as he said, to make it so. The paradise of shoppers had replaced the other one as the telos of the American experiment, but the ability of the myth to regenerate itself, to seamlessly cover over any event, remained eerily intact.

BACK TO EGYPT

A slightly narrower aperture. In August of 2001, my family and I, like tens of thousands of fellow Americans, traveled to Europe. The fresh green breast of the New World (a bit of a stretch for Jamaica Bay, but let it go) fell away below us, and eight hours and two movies later the clouds opened out on the half-harrowed fields and slate-roofed villages surrounding Prague. I had spent a good part of the journey staring at the global-positioning screens overhead, watching them calculate and recalculate precisely how far we had traveled and how much farther we still had to go. Would that it were that easy.

I spent the month that followed tripping over history, dogged by death. A personal thing, I suppose. My parents had chosen to return home after their forty-year sojourn in the New World. Czech had been my first language, Queens a suburb of Brno. In my head, I carried a wonderfully muddled version of Plutarch’s Parallel Lives—Czech rather than Greek, American rather than Roman, but parallel all the same: On the one hand, Tomáš Masaryk, fleeing into exile; on the other, George Washington, already somehow triumphant, crossing the Delaware. On this side, Bence, betrayed at Munich; on the other, Franklin, reeling in the thunderbolt on a key. All seemed to reinforce a series of binary oppositions, neat as the base pairs on a double helix: tradition versus self-determination; the humility born of experience versus the flushed triumphalism of power; the profound, almost filial attachment to place (the x coordinate to history’s y) versus the freedom of the open road. Tragedy versus optimism. Death versus life.

I spent a good part of our vacation fighting against that inevitable sense of constriction, that horrible thickening of the atmosphere, that is the Old World’s answer to the thin, boundless air of the West. Here they were again: the ubiquitous monuments, the unnumbered dead. Here were the generations from Adam down, staggering under the piled weight of the centuries. As I was—bearing history like an anvil. It hardly helped that my struggle itself was absurd, based on a cliché of continental identity more appropriate to Henry James’s world than my own. I was indulging in a kind of double generalization. I told myself, ignoring not only the determined variety, the at times unbearable lightness of the new Europe, but the historical shadows we Americans had grown since Nathaniel Hawthorne had argued we had none. Still, for all that, a generalization to be reckoned with, difficult to deny.

What was I supposed to do with this knowledge, these layers of grief, like strata in stone, this constant folding-in of death? In every village a graveyard, dense with color, in every graveyard, tending their dead as if they were kohlrabi or turnips, the generations of the living: snipping,
pruning, tossing the dead blooms into the tilting wooden wagon by the gate. It was to escape this infernal fussing, this easy familiarity with death—the three-year-old running down the path to bring her mother a trowel—that I'd gone west, to California, where no one seemed to die at all. Where once, while hunting bugs with my daughter in an overgrown field just outside the high desert town of Lone Pine, I had stumbled over a fallen gravestone and realized I was standing in the middle of a vast cemetery that no one, but no one, knew was there. That had been erased from the memory of men as surely as the wind had erased the lettering on its tablets. "You must understand," my mother had told me throughout my childhood, praising the communal business of caring for the dead (hoping, I suppose, to inoculate me against my culture's lack of respect for done-ness, for gravity, or rather its inevitable issue, the grave), "the less you know of death, the more it frightens you."

But I had been born in America. We made history here; we didn't need to know it. To get away from all that depressing tonnage (which even then threatened to become my legacy), I did what Americans have always done: I ran. I moved as far west as I could without coming around again, stopping, finally, so close to the edge of the continent—the very lip edge of the millennium—that, from my door, a well-kicked soccer ball would have landed in the Pacific.

And yet here I was, a mere decade later, strangely famished yet not quite sure what it was, precisely, that I craved, what nourishment I hoped to derive from the experience. After all, what did all this have to do with me?

On a ramble through the forests of Moravia, three days before we left, we found ourselves eating our röhlky and cheese in a walled country churchyard next to a nondescript white-plastered building topped by a wrought-iron skull. "That? That's the kostnice," said the pimpled young man in soccer shorts, desultorily scratching at the grass with a rake. The charnel house. He agreed, grudgingly, to let us in. We stepped inside. Our eyes adjusted to the gloom. Behind a small, gaudy altar to the Virgin were two columns so massive that for a moment I didn't understand what I was seeing: not stone, or mortar, but thousands of human shin bones, stacked lovingly each to each, forming ledges, pediments, smooth and cool as marble. Perhaps ten feet in diameter, topped by a delicate frieze of crania, they towered over us. For decoration, at regular intervals in the curving wall of bone, a skull had been lovingly set inside a human pelvis. Someone's mother. Someone's son. Like a bud at the center of a wide, white rose.

"Větší jsou lepší"—There are better ones in Jičín—said the youth, impatiently shuffling his feet. I had no doubt it was true.

We returned home on September 4, walked out into the humid air and familiar lingo of New York. A week later, the Old World, so to speak, came to us. The kostnice was here now.

In the months that followed, we erased it, carted it off in trucks. It had nothing to do with us. There was nothing to learn. We were still innocent, apart.

Separateness from the world, for individuals as for nations, comes at a price, and it matters little if the isolation is physical or metaphysical. Our abiding sense of ourselves as a nation "under divine influence," as a recent letter to the New York Times put it, has already cost us a great deal. Perhaps, therefore, if we are to thrive in this not yet American century, if we are to prove capable of the kind of self-scrutiny necessary for survival, we may need to consider a reversal of direction.

Perhaps what we need to do is leave the City upon a hill, walk out of Canaan. Return to Egypt, filthy with history. The crowds thicken as you walk east—the crowds of the living and the dead, The doors of the kostnice are open. Enter it. You know this place, these bones. They are yours. Admit it.
CONSPIRACY
THEORY

by
Natasha Bernstein

So, the final question remains: who ARE they and why are they out to get us? Who DID shoot JFK, and what are they hiding at Area 51? What did the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Policy REALLY have up their sleeves? How much did Marilyn know, and was THAT why she "overdosed?" And how does the Mob fit in?

Who laundered that money for the Iran/Contra deal? What did the CIA have to do with POW's and MIA's in Vietnam and Southeast Asian Drug Lords? What are those intelligence operatives doing in Columbia right now?

Is it a mere co-incidence that twenty major eyewitnesses in Dallas on November 22, 1963 "died" within one year? And what about UFO alien abductions? Did Timothy McVeigh REALLY have an electronic microchip implanted in his buttocks, as he claimed before his execution? Why are Mumia and Leonard Peltier still in prison, when direct evidence exists to prove them innocent of any crime?

Have the Bavarian Illuminati REALLY been hiding proof of their contact with extra-terrestrial intelligence for 250 years? Are crop circles REALLY just the work of nerdy teenage geeks who never had a girlfriend? Are military jets REALLY controlling global climate patterns by means of "chem-trails?" And what WAS Dwight Eisenhower REALLY trying to tell us when he warned us about "The Military Industrial Complex" just before he left the White House?

And, last but not least ... what DID the current administration know about the events of 9/11, a priori, and WHY is there not ONE SINGLE name beginning or ending with "Mohammed" on the passenger manifests of ANY of the four planes that crashed that day?

And... why is it that so many of us who have publicly posed these and other vital questions over the years... have just... well... strangely... sort of... disappeared? Never to be seen... or heard from... again?
Sensations of an Infant Heart, by Walton Ford, whose work will be on display this winter at Paul Kasmin Gallery, in New York City.