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# Plough

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Q U A R T E R L Y

SUMMER 2019

# Beyond Capitalism



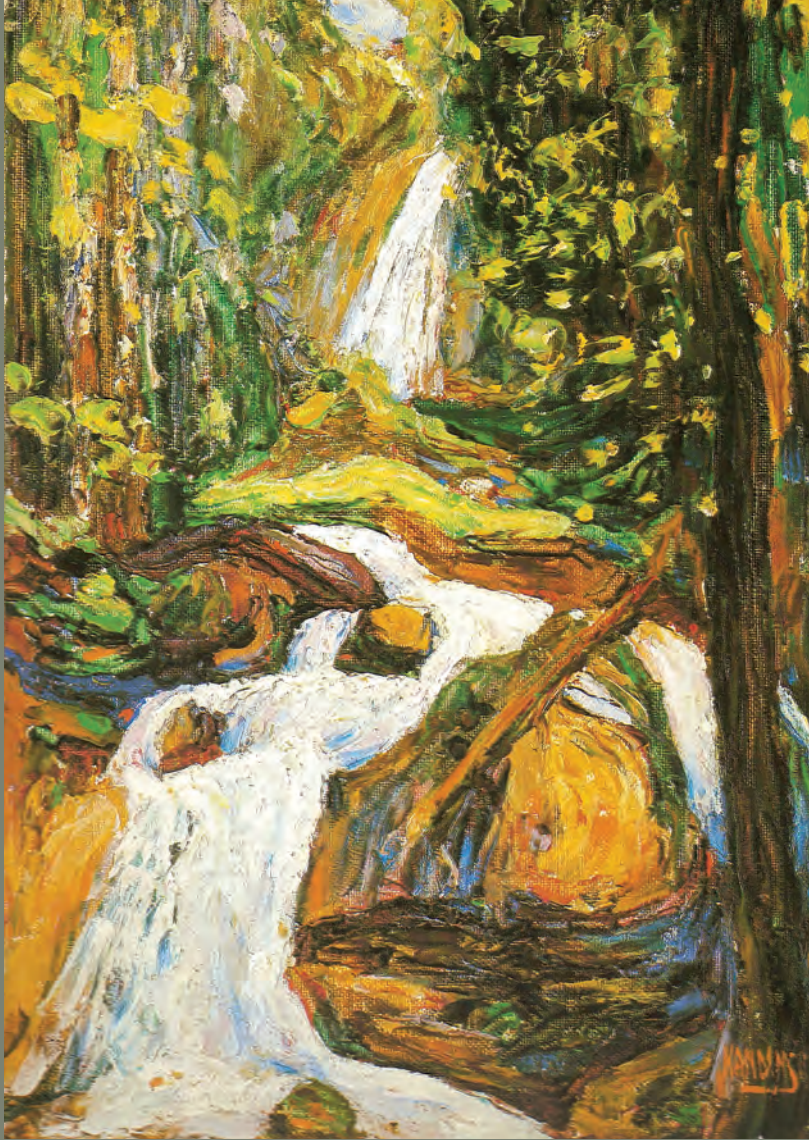
**Comrade Ruskin**  
Eugene McCarragher

**Who Owns a River?**  
Christian Woodard

**Working Girls**  
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Christian Communism David Bentley Hart • The McDonald's Test Chris Arnade  
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Wassily Kandinsky, *Kochel: Waterfall*, oil on canvas, 1900

 **Plough Quarterly**

BREAKING GROUND FOR A RENEWED WORLD

Summer 2019, Number 21

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# Plough Quarterly

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## Meet the community behind *Plough*

*Plough Quarterly* is published by the Bruderhof, an international community of families and singles seeking to follow Jesus together. Members of the Bruderhof are committed to a way of radical discipleship in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount. Inspired by the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 2 and 4), they renounce private property and share everything in common in a life of nonviolence, justice, and service to neighbors near and far. The community includes people from a wide range of

backgrounds. There are twenty-three Bruderhof settlements in both rural and urban locations in the United States, England, Germany, Australia, and Paraguay, with around 3,000 people in all.

To learn more or arrange a visit, see the community's website at [bruderhof.com](http://bruderhof.com). ➔

*Plough Quarterly* features original stories, ideas, and culture to inspire everyday faith and action. Starting from the conviction that the teachings and example of Jesus can transform and renew our world, we aim to apply them to all aspects of life, seeking common ground with all people of goodwill regardless of creed. The goal of *Plough Quarterly* is to build a living network of readers, contributors, and practitioners so that, in the words of Hebrews, we may "spur one another on toward love and good deeds."

*Plough Quarterly* includes contributions that we believe are worthy of our readers' consideration, whether or not we fully agree with them. Views expressed by contributors are their own and do not necessarily reflect the editorial position of *Plough* or of the Bruderhof communities.

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# The Economics of Love

## Beyond Capitalism – and Socialism

PETER MOMMSEN

**L**iberty, equality, fraternity: the promise of the French Revolution intoxicated twenty-one-year-old William Wordsworth. Looking back on that time, he penned a poem that famously evokes his generation's fervor. "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, / But to be young was very heaven!" He and his fellow radicals – "we who were strong in love" – felt sure they could make real change in the here and now: "not in Utopia . . . but in the very world, which is the world / Of all of us."

The young poet's ardor leaps out across the intervening centuries. In *The Prelude*, the 1805 poem in which these lines appear, the details of the French revolutionary program get scant attention. What matters is the sense of endless

possibilities, the excitement of a "we" joining together to shape a new world.

That excitement is in the air again. A leading US presidential candidate espouses socialism, as does Britain's Leader of the Opposition. Europe's social democratic parties are hastening to reclaim their class-war roots so as to fend off far-left challengers. Membership in the Democratic Socialists of America has grown from six thousand in 2016 to around sixty thousand in 2019. According to a much-cited 2018 Gallup poll, 51 percent of Americans age eighteen to twenty-nine have a positive view of socialism (just 45 percent say the same of capitalism).

Today's radicals don't talk so much of bliss, at least to judge from the earnest pages of left

Artwork  
by Elise  
Palmigiani



## All Things in Common

*Peter Walpot (1521-1578), a Hutterite bishop, wrote a classic Anabaptist confession of faith, the Great Article Book, from which this reading is taken.*

**Property has no part** in the Christian church; rather, it belongs to the world, it belongs to paganism, to those that do not have the love of God; it is proper to those that live according to their own will. If there were no self-will, there would be no property. True community of goods, on the other hand, is proper to believers, for by divine right, says Augustine, all things ought to be common, and no one should take to himself what is God's, any more than he would the air, rain, snow, or water, as well as the sun, the moon, and the elements. . . .

Whoever encloses and appropriates that which is, and should be, free, does so against Him who made and created it free, and it is sin. . . . But through men's acquired wickedness, through envy and greed everybody puts everything in his own pocket. The one says, "This is mine," and the other, "That is mine," and so a division has arisen among human beings, and great inequality has come into this life. Unfortunately, it has gone so far that, if they could grab hold of the sun and the moon and the elements, they would appropriate them and sell them for money.

Source: "True Surrender and Christian Community of Goods," Section 143, ed. Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, January 1957.

journals like *Jacobin* and *In These Times*. Even so, there's a sense of newly opened possibilities: that now is the moment for the tyranny of concentrated power and wealth to be overcome by a mass movement of solidarity.

Socialism seems to mean different things to different individuals; as in Wordsworth's day, the details of a particular program don't appear to be what's driving the radical wave. Instead, what grips people is the liberating sense of finally having a cause to fight for.

**B**ut what exactly is this cause? Socialism's champions know how to take effective whacks at capitalism, and they get at least one thing right: the fact that we live in a society of immense affluence and desperate poverty is a public sin with which no person of good will can be at peace. Anyone who affirms the Golden Rule – "Do to others as you would have done to you" – is morally bound to strive for the same essentials of life for others that one desires for one's own family: health care, decent housing, education, a living wage, and security in old age. That millions lack these essentials in the richest civilization the world has ever known should shock the conscience.

But diagnosis is not yet the cure. Socialists grow coy when it comes to the realities of a state takeover of the entire economy. Bhaskar Sunkara's much-discussed book *The Socialist Manifesto*, for example, opens with a fun chapter, "A Day in the Life of a Socialist Citizen," that imagines an America in 2036 where wage labor has been abolished and the means of production are now owned by the government. This light-hearted depiction of a New Jersey pasta-sauce company called Bongiovi and a workers' revolution led by Bruce Springsteen is a far cry from real-world examples of socialist governance, such as the ongoing crisis in Venezuela. Thus this

peek into an alternative future conveys the opposite of what it intends. We're invited to take it on faith that this time around, a happy conjunction of democracy and good intentions will somehow overcome socialism's long track record of sliding into dictatorship and repression.

Meanwhile, capitalism's malcontents on the right are equally hazy about ends and means. Many younger conservatives rightly deplore the ways capitalism is wrecking traditional bonds of solidarity, community, and family. They see capitalism's liberal elites aggressively sabotaging the values that give the lives of the working poor meaning and dignity: the institution of marriage, the bonds of faith, ideals of womanhood and manhood, loyalty to place, a sense of belonging. *First Things* magazine recently published a punchy manifesto that declares: "We oppose the soulless society of individual affluence. . . . We resist a tyrannical liberalism. . . . We want a country that works for workers."

This statement's signatories do have specific suggestions for how to edge toward these goals. Yet the contours of the eventual society that would truly fulfill their aspirations remain frustratingly vague. Proposals that circulate online – three-acres-and-a-cow distributism, Habsburg restoration – sound just as improbable as Marx's communist utopia.

In their indictments of capitalism, conservatives and socialists share some remarkable common ground, though of course their preferred remedies sharply diverge. Both stand against apologists for the present system such as the author Steven Pinker, who trumpet statistics showing rising per capita income, life expectancy, and personal freedom in order to accuse capitalism's critics of ingratitude. In response, the critics can point to other, grimmer statistics: in the world's wealthiest countries, rates of mental illness have jumped,

while so-called deaths of despair from suicide and drug overdoses are reaching epidemic levels. Falling birth rates in countries with high standards of living seem to reflect pessimism about humanity's future. There's the looming risk of catastrophic climate change caused, in no small part, by capitalism. Is this, they ask, really what a human-friendly economy looks like?

**T**hose eager for a life beyond capitalism must make a crucial decision: whether or not their main hope lies in grasping for the levers of government power. This is not the place for exploring the uses and limits of politics. But Christians especially should keep in mind the downsides inherent in any attempt to secure the common good through state coercion.

Any serious vision of the common good is anchored in moral convictions. Yet state imposition of moral convictions amounts to a state religion. (Martin Hägglund's call to socialism in his book *This Life* even calls it a "secular faith.") Whatever the creed – Robespierre's Cult of Reason, or Catholic integralism, or a progressive college's code of student conduct, or sharia law – the moment that it is backed by the sword of the state it will take on the role of Dostoyevsky's blasphemous Grand Inquisitor, offering cheap happiness in exchange for spiritual freedom.

Christians should fear assuming this role as a threat to their own integrity. Power corrupts religion from within by substituting coercion for free assent; the heavier the coercion exercised, the deeper the self-corruption. As the early church father Tertullian protested, "It is assuredly no part of religion to compel religion."

To illustrate the two contrasting paths Christians can take, let's time-travel back to the spiritual roots of my own community, the

Bruderhof, in the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century. At that time, the so-called Magisterial Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin sought to purge the abuses of the medieval church by allying themselves with secular princes, using the power of the state to impose what they believed to be a purified gospel.

By contrast, the Radical Reformers emerged from a grassroots movement for justice among the common people. The peasants formulated their demands in Twelve Articles that are considered modern Europe's first human rights document. It included pleas to end cruel levels of taxation, tithing, and forced labor, as well as calls for commoners to be allowed to enjoy the bounty of creation, which originally had been given to all humankind: "It is unbrotherly and not in accordance with the word of God that the simple man does not have the right to catch game, fowl, and fish."

When peasant protests turned violent in 1525, both Luther and Catholic prelates pronounced God's blessing on the princes' bloody campaign of repression; an estimated one hundred thousand were killed. In the aftermath of this church-sanctioned mass murder, the Radical Reformation movement was born. Having learned hard lessons about taking up arms, its leaders (mostly) preached nonviolence. Yet their movement embodied the Twelve Articles' demand for brotherly community, now transformed by a Christian imagination. Because they insisted on voluntary baptism of adults rather than mandatory infant baptism, they were nicknamed Anabaptists ("re-baptizers"). Anabaptism was soon a capital crime throughout the Holy Roman Empire, and some three thousand Anabaptists were executed in the following decades.

Nevertheless, the movement spread. Around 1527, Anabaptists in present-day Czechia

started forming communal settlements in which, following the example of the first Christians, members held all things in common. By century's end, there were about one hundred such settlements, with twenty to thirty thousand inhabitants living in free-willing community. Though nearly wiped out during the Thirty Years' War, they survived, and later their descendants, known as the Hutterites, immigrated to the United States. My own wife and children are proud descendants of these brave farmers who five centuries ago risked torture and death to live out a voluntary Christian vision of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

**T**his issue of *Plough* springs from a core Radical Reformation conviction: that there is a common life that overcomes economic exploitation, a life that is both thoroughly practical and independent of the state. This alternative society is possible here and now; anyone can pursue it. What's more, it is a vision that has existed since Christianity's beginnings. It's at the heart of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and throughout the New Testament, as well as in the writings of the Old Testament prophets. This vision is exemplified by the communal life of the first church in Jerusalem, in which "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

Some long-time *Plough* readers are no doubt already muttering: here we go again. Yes we do, because the challenges posed by socialists touch on a part of Jesus' proclamation that mainstream Christianity has gone to almost comical lengths to avoid. Like Jesus' hard sayings on divorce or nonviolence, his teachings on riches and private property are politely sidelined, explained away as



historically specific or as rhetorical exaggerations. Alternatively, these teachings are treated as a special vocation for monastics, mendicants, and missionaries, a heroic feat that the rank-and-file should not attempt. In the place of voluntary poverty and sacrificial generosity are substituted the middle-class virtues of stewardship and philanthropy.

Yet Jesus' economic teachings are just as integral to the life he taught as any of his other basic commands: love to neighbors and enemies, hatred of hypocrisy, truthfulness, sexual purity, or the works of mercy. These teachings are not free-floating maxims but are all intimately interrelated; the way of life outlined in the Sermon on the Mount is a single whole that at once enables and requires freedom from private possessions. "You cannot serve God and mammon" is a truth that cuts through all spheres of life, as Eberhard Arnold describes in this issue (page 39). The apostles and early church fathers reiterate the same bracing axiom.

This interrelationship cuts both ways: Christianity's loss of one element – its original economic radicalism – ends up undermining its other claims too. The sanctity of life would be far easier to defend if Christians could point to their own churches as communities that gave generous economic and emotional support to new mothers and to the families of children with disabilities. Marriages would be more likely to endure without divorce if freed from the stress of economic insecurity. "Do not worry about tomorrow" appears to be foolish advice – unless a person has a church community that will step in when she loses her job or suffers a serious illness. Even Jesus' command of nonviolence becomes more understandable (though no less counterintuitive) if one no longer has to defend one's private property in order for one's family to



## The Visible Communion of Saints

*Peter Riedemann (1506–1556), an early Anabaptist leader, wrote the 1542 apologia excerpted here as a defense to Philip of Hesse, a prince who was holding him prisoner.*

**Community of goods** applies to both spiritual and material gifts. All of God's gifts, not only the spiritual but also the temporal, have been given so that they not be kept but be shared with each other. Therefore, the communion of saints should be visible not only in spiritual but also in temporal things. Paul says one person should not have abundance while another suffers want; instead, there should be equality (2 Cor. 8:7–15). . . .

The Creation still testifies today that at the beginning God ordained that people should own nothing individually but should have all things in common with each other (Gen. 1:26–29). However, by taking what they should have left, and by leaving what they should have taken (Gen. 3:2–12), people have gained possession of things and have become more accustomed to accumulating things and hardened in doing so. Through such appropriating and collecting of created things, people have been led so far from God that they have forgotten the Creator (Rom. 1:18–25).

Source: Peter Riedemann's *Hutterite Confession of Faith*, trans. and ed. John J. Friesen (Plough, 2019), 119.



## Community Is a Gift of the Spirit

*From Foundations of Our Faith and Calling, the Bruderhof's 2012 community rule.*

**God wants to gather** a people on earth who belong to his new creation. He calls them out to form a new society that makes his justice and peace tangible. Among them private property falls away, and they are united in a bond of solidarity and equality in which each one says: Whatever I have belongs to the others, and if I am ever in need, they will help me. Then Jesus' words can come true: "Do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matt. 6:31–33).

Such a people came into being in Jerusalem at the first Pentecost. As described in Acts 2 and 4, the Holy Spirit descended on the believers who had gathered after Jesus' resurrection, and the first communal church was born. Just as it was then, so it will be today whenever the Spirit is poured out on a group of people. They will be filled with love for Christ and for one another, and their communion of love will lead them to share their goods, talents, and lives, boldly testifying to the gospel. This is our calling in church community.

Source: *Foundations of Our Faith and Calling* (Plough, 2012), 5.

survive. These are just a few examples of the convincing power that Christianity would gain by refusing to compromise with mammon.

**C**hristian cultural leaders, including those who cultivate a radical brand, don't shy from provocation when it comes to morality, politics, or theology—but they tend to tread gingerly around the dollars and cents of discipleship. Again and again one meets the same bald assertion that a life of economic sharing is marginal, sectarian, literalistic, extremist, and just not doable.

It's important to make a distinction that the New Testament doesn't speak of voluntary poverty and community of goods as rigid ethical demands, as if owning property were a sin in itself such as lust or idolatry. This misunderstanding stems from the legalistic need to reduce discipleship to a list of duties and prohibitions. Far from it: community of goods in the New Testament is simply the practical expression of love when it overflows into economics. Naturally, this can take many different forms. Here's some first-hand evidence that a life beyond capitalism is not as unattainable as it's made out to be:

This summer the Bruderhof community celebrates the beginning of its hundredth year of living together in full community of goods. Over its history, our community has had its share of imperfections and follies, just like any group of human beings. But by the grace of God, and with thanks to friends far and near, we're still here.

The Bruderhof originated in an unusually fertile and febrile moment: Germany immediately after World War I. In 1920 the theologian Eberhard Arnold moved with his family from Berlin to a small village to start an intentional community. Initially, this was a circle of young Christians disillusioned with the church's

complicity in the militarism that led to World War I. With the Sermon on the Mount as their charter, they drew inspiration from the early church and the Anabaptists as well as Francis and Clare of Assisi, the early Quakers, and the religious socialist movement that included Christoph Blumhardt and Karl Barth. The idea of a rural settlement came from Gustav Landauer, a Jewish anarchist visionary who had been assassinated by right-wing thugs the previous year (page 112); Landauer also inspired the kibbutz movement, which was forming around the same time.

A century later, our community remains small in comparison with many churches. Still, it's home to three thousand people of many nationalities – in two dozen locations on five continents – who live together and share everything. In our case, this sharing takes the form of a lifelong vow of poverty: we each own literally nothing.

My point in mentioning these details is not self-congratulation but simply to establish an empirical fact: it is possible for people to live this way. It's possible in diverse geographic settings, with significant cultural variety, over five or six generations.

And of course the Bruderhof is just one recent example in the long history of Christian community. "See how they love one another," the pagans exclaimed about the early church according to Tertullian in AD 197. The love that impressed the pagans wasn't a matter of tender feelings but of concrete acts of mutual help, as the historian Alan Kreider describes in his book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*. In the words of the third-century Christian lawyer Minucius Felix, "We do not speak great things, we live them." The Christians formed

an alternative society in which the educated and illiterate, slave and free, served each other as brothers and sisters, with none calling anything their own if another had greater need. To use Wordsworth's phrase, they were the "strong in love."

Starting with the early church and then the

birth of monasticism in the Egyptian desert, this history includes groups as diverse as 1500-year-old Benedictine orders, reformist movements like the Franciscans, the Waldensians of the medieval period, the Beguines and Beghards, the Moravian

Brethren, the Jesuit *reducciones* in Paraguay and Brazil, the Little Gidding community immortalized by T. S. Eliot, the Jesus Family in China, Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker movement, and Latin America's *comunidades del base*. Numerous communities across the denominational spectrum exist today, from the Catholic Focolare communities based in Italy, to the Evangelical Adsideo community in Oregon, to the Anglican Jesus Abbey in South Korea.

This history should serve to remind us of the possibilities of the present. As a new generation asks hard questions about justice, solidarity, and human happiness, we Christians must remember that we have had access to the answers all along. Of all people we should know: another life is possible.

We don't need a shallow social justice Christianity that lurches from one progressive cause to the next. We can have the real thing: the way of life Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. This life is there for the having. It is bliss to be alive. ➤

**"We do not  
speak great  
things,  
we live them."**

*Minucius Felix*

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# What Lies Beyond Capitalism?

*A Christian Exploration*



**DAVID BENTLEY HART**

**Capitalism can't be reconciled with the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth** – or so claims the New Testament translator David Bentley Hart. Christ condemned not just greed for riches, but their very possession, and Jesus' first followers were voluntary communists. With technologized market forces dominating our world, is a truly Christian economics still possible? What, if anything, lies beyond capitalism?

## I : What Is Capitalism?

Commerce is, in its essence, *satanic*.

Commerce is the repayment of what was loaned, it is the loan made with the stipulation: Pay me more than I give you.

—Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu*

I have no entirely satisfactory answer to the questions that prompt these reflections; but I do think the right *approach* to the answers can be glimpsed fairly clearly if we first take the time to define our terms. These days, after all, especially in America, the word *capitalism* has become a ridiculously capacious portmanteau word for every imaginable form of economic exchange, no matter how primitive or rudimentary. I take it, however, that here we are employing it somewhat more precisely, to indicate an epoch in the history of market economies that commenced in earnest only a few centuries ago. *Capitalism*, as many historians define it, is the set of financial conventions that took shape in the age of industrialization and that gradually supplanted the mercantilism of the previous era. As Proudhon defined it in 1861, it is a system in which as a general rule those whose work creates profits neither own the means of production nor enjoy the fruits of their labor.

This form of commerce largely destroyed the contractual power of free skilled labor, killed off the artisanal guilds, and introduced

instead a mass wage system that reduced labor to a negotiable commodity. In this way, it created a market for the exploitation of cheap and desperate laborers. It was also increasingly abetted by government policies that reduced the options of the disadvantaged to wage-slavery or total indigence (such as Britain's enclosures of the commons starting in the middle of the eighteenth century). All of this, moreover, necessarily entailed a shift in economic eminence from the merchant class – purveyors of goods contracted from and produced by independent labor, subsidiary estates, or small local markets – to capitalist investors who both produce and sell their goods. And this, in the fullness of time, evolved into a fully realized corporate system that transformed the joint-stock companies of early modern trade into engines for generating immense capital at the secondary level of financial speculation: a purely financial market where wealth is created for and enjoyed by those who toil not, neither do they spin, but who instead engage in an incessant circulation of investment and divestment, as a kind of game of chance.

For this reason, capitalism might be said to have achieved its most perfect expression in the rise of the commercial corporation with limited liability, an institution that allows the game to be played in abstraction even from whether the businesses invested in ultimately succeed or fail. (One can profit just

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*David Bentley Hart is a philosopher, writer, translator, and cultural commentator. His books include, most recently, The New Testament: A Translation, and the upcoming That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation (Yale University, 2019).*

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as much from the destruction of livelihoods as from their creation.) Such a corporation is a truly insidious entity: *Before* the law, it enjoys the status of a legal person – a legal privilege formerly granted only to “corporate” associations recognized as providing public goods, such as universities or monasteries – but *under* the law it is required to behave as the most despicable person imaginable. Almost everywhere in the capitalist world (in America, for instance, since the 1919 decision in *Dodge v. Ford*), a corporation of this sort is required to seek no end other than maximum gains for its shareholders; it is forbidden to allow any other consideration – say, a calculation of what constitutes decent or indecent profits, the welfare of laborers, charitable causes that might divert profits, or what have you – to hinder it in this pursuit.

The corporation is thus morally bound to amorality. And this whole system, obviously, not only allows for, but positively depends upon, immense concentrations of private capital and dispositive discretion over its use as unencumbered by regulations as possible. It also allows for the exploitation of material and human resources on an unprecedentedly massive scale. And, inevitably, it eventuates in a culture of consumerism, because it must cultivate a social habit of consumption extravagantly in excess of mere natural need or even (arguably) natural want. It is not enough to satisfy natural desires; a capitalist culture must ceaselessly seek to fabricate new desires, through appeals to what 1 John calls “the lust of the eyes.”

The very least that one must concede is that capitalism “works.” That is, it produces enormous wealth, and adapts itself with remarkable plasticity to even the most abrupt changes of cultural and material circumstances. When it has faltered, here or there, it has evolved new



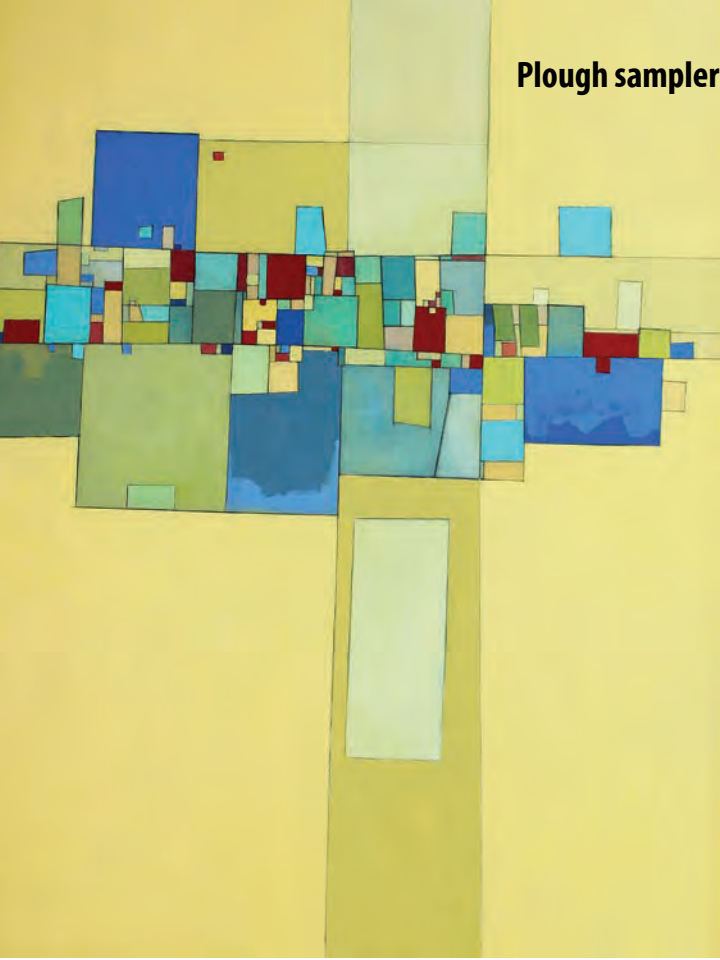
**TELL ME**, do you really seek riches and financial gain from the destitute? If this person had the resources to make you even wealthier, why did he come begging to your door? He came seeking an ally but found an enemy. He came seeking medicine, and stumbled onto poison. Though you have an obligation to remedy the poverty of someone like this, instead you increase the need, seeking a harvest from the desert.

*Basil of Caesarea, “Against Those Who Lend at Interest”*

mechanisms for preventing the same mistake from being made again. It does not bring about a just distribution of wealth, of course; nor could it. A capitalist society not only tolerates, but positively requires, the existence of a pauper class, not only as a reserve of labor value, but also because capitalism relies on a stable credit economy, and a credit economy requires a certain supply of perennial debtors whose poverty – through predatory lending and interest practices – can be converted into capital

Deborah Batt, *Urban Village*

Previous spread:  
Deborah Batt, *Rural Decay*



Deborah Batt,  
*Community*

for their creditors. The perpetual insolvency of the working poor and lower-middle class is an inexhaustible font of profits for the institutions upon which the investment class depends.

One can also concede that, now and then, the immense returns reaped by the few *can* redound to the benefit of the many; but there is no fixed rule to that effect, and generally quite the opposite is the case. Capitalism can create and enrich or destroy and impoverish, as prudence warrants; it can encourage liberty and equity or abet tyranny and injustice, as necessity dictates. It has no natural attachment to the institutions of democratic or liberal freedom. It has no moral nature at all. It is a system that cannot be abused, but only practiced with greater or lesser efficiency. But, of course, viewed from any intelligible moral perspective, that which is beyond the distinction between good and evil is, in its essence, evil.

For all these reasons, it seems wise to me that we have elected to ask ourselves not what comes *after* capitalism, but rather what lies *beyond* it. As far as I can see, what comes *after* capitalism – that is, what follows from it in the natural course of things – is nothing. This is not because I believe that the triumph of the bourgeois corporatist market state constitutes the “end of history,” the final rational result of some inexorable material dialectic. Much less do I imagine that the logic of capitalism has won the future and that its reign is destined to be perpetual. In fact, I suspect that it is, in the long run, an unsustainable system.

My conviction is based, rather, on a very simple calculus of the disproportion between infinite appetite and finite resources. Of its nature, capitalism is a monstrously metastasized psychosis, one that will ultimately, if left to itself, reduce the whole of the natural order to a desert: despoiled, ravaged, poisoned, profaned. The whole planet is already immersed in an atmosphere of microplastic particles, wrapped in a thickening shroud of carbon emissions, whelmed in floods of heavy metals and toxins. And I have no expectation that any contrary impulse – say, the instinct of survival, a sane ethical consequentialism, a solicitude for nature, a spontaneous reverence for the glory of creation – will significantly impede its advance toward that inevitable terminus.

Essentially, capitalism is the process of securing evanescent material advantages through the permanent destruction of its own material basis. It is a system of total consumption, not simply in the commercial sense, but in the sense also that its necessary logic is the purest nihilism, a commitment to the transformation of concrete material plenitude into immaterial absolute value. I expect, therefore, that – barring the appearance, at an oblique angle, of some adventitious, countervailing



agency – capitalism will not have exhausted its intrinsic energies until it has exhausted the world itself. That would, in fact, mark its final triumph: the total rendition of the last intractable residues of the merely intrinsically good into the impalpable Pythagorean eternity of market value. And any force capable of interrupting this process would have to come from beyond.

## II : Beyond Capitalism

**We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. . . . This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which Messiah might enter.**

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History”

The ultimate horizon of that “beyond,” to be honest, is not difficult to imagine. It is more or less the same thing that all sane rational wills long for, almost as a kind of transcendental: history’s sabbath, blissful anarchy, pure communism, a human and terrestrial reality where acquisitive desire can find nothing to fasten upon because nothing is withheld, and nothing delightful or useful is out of reach, and all things are shared by a community of rational love. Even the blithering neo-liberal naïf who believes in supply-side economics is, unbeknownst to himself, an anarcho-communist in his profoundest transcendental intentions; somewhere deep within him a little Pyotr Kropotkin sleeps and dreams of a world purged of greed and violence. Everyone longs for the terrestrial paradise, for Eden as the end of the story rather than as its irrecoverable beginning.

But Eden is not the dialectical issue of

history, the final fruit of an occult rationality working itself out in and through the apparent contradictions of finitude. It is *beyond* in every sense. It inhabits time only as an eschatological judgment upon the present, a constant anamnesis of the good order of creation that we have always already betrayed. We know it principally as condemnation, and only secondarily as a sustaining hope. And how to translate that judgment into an agency immanent to history, one sufficiently powerful to disrupt the rule of capital before nothing remains to be saved, is the great question of all political thought of any real substance in the modern world.

It is a question, moreover, that Christians cannot avoid. Admittedly, the social and institutional history of the church gives one little hope that very many Christians have ever been acutely conscious of this. But, whether or not they care to acknowledge the full implications of their faith, Christians are still obliged to affirm that this eschatological judgment has indeed already appeared within history, and in a very particular material, social, and political form. In many ways, John’s Gospel is especially troubling as regards the sheer inescapable immediacy of God’s verdict upon every worldly structure of sin. There eschatology becomes almost perfectly immanent. There Christ passes through history as a light that reveals all things for what they are; and it is our reaction to him – our ability or inability to recognize that light – that shows us ourselves. To have seen him is to have seen the Father, and so to reject him is to claim the devil as one’s father instead. Our hearts are laid bare, the deepest decisions of our secret selves are brought out into the open, and we are exposed for what we are – what we have made ourselves.

But it is not only John’s Gospel, really, that tells us as much. The grand eschatological allegory of Matthew 25, for instance, says it

too. In John's Gospel, one's failure to recognize Christ as the true face of the Father, the one who comes from above, is one's damnation, here and now. In Matthew's, one's failure to recognize the face of Christ – and therefore the face of God – in the abject and oppressed, the suffering and disenfranchised, is the revelation that one has chosen hell as one's home. All our works, as Paul says, will be proved by fire; and those whose work fails the test can be saved only "as by fire." Nor does the New Testament leave us in any doubt regarding the *only* political and social practices that can pass through that trial without being wholly consumed.

Whatever else capitalism may be, it is first and foremost a system for producing as much *private* wealth as possible by squandering as much as possible of humanity's *common* inheritance of the goods of creation. But Christ condemned not only an unhealthy preoccupation with riches, but the getting and keeping of riches as such. The most obvious example of this, found in all three synoptic Gospels, is the story of the rich young ruler, and of Christ's remark about the camel and the needle's eye.

But one can look anywhere in the Gospels for confirmation. Christ clearly means what he says when quoting the prophet: he has been anointed by God's Spirit to preach good tidings *to the poor* (Luke 4:18). To the prosperous, the tidings he bears are decidedly grim: "Woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full; woe to you who are full fed, for you shall hunger; woe to you who are now laughing, for you shall mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24–25). As Abraham tells Dives in Hades, "You fully received your good things during your lifetime . . . so now you suffer" (Luke 16:25). Christ not only demands that we give freely to all who ask from us (Matt. 5:42), with such prodigality that one hand is ignorant of the other's largesse (Matt. 6:3); he explicitly

*forbids* storing up earthly wealth – not merely storing it up too obsessively – and allows instead only the hoarding of the treasures of heaven (Matt. 6:19–20). He tells *all* who would follow him to sell all their possessions and give the proceeds away as alms (Luke 12:33), and explicitly states that "every one of you who does not give up all that he himself possesses is incapable of being my disciple" (Luke 14:33). As Mary says, part of the saving promise of the gospel is that the Lord "has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away starving" (Luke 1:53). James, of course, says it most strikingly:

Come now, you who are rich, weep, howling at the miseries coming upon you; your riches are corrupted and moths have consumed your clothes; your gold and silver have corroded, and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. You have stored up treasure in the Last Days! See, the wages you have given so late to the laborers who have harvested your fields cry aloud, and the cries of those who have harvested your fields have entered the ear of the Lord Sabaoth. You have lived in luxury, and lived upon the earth in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts on a day of slaughter. (James 5:1–6)

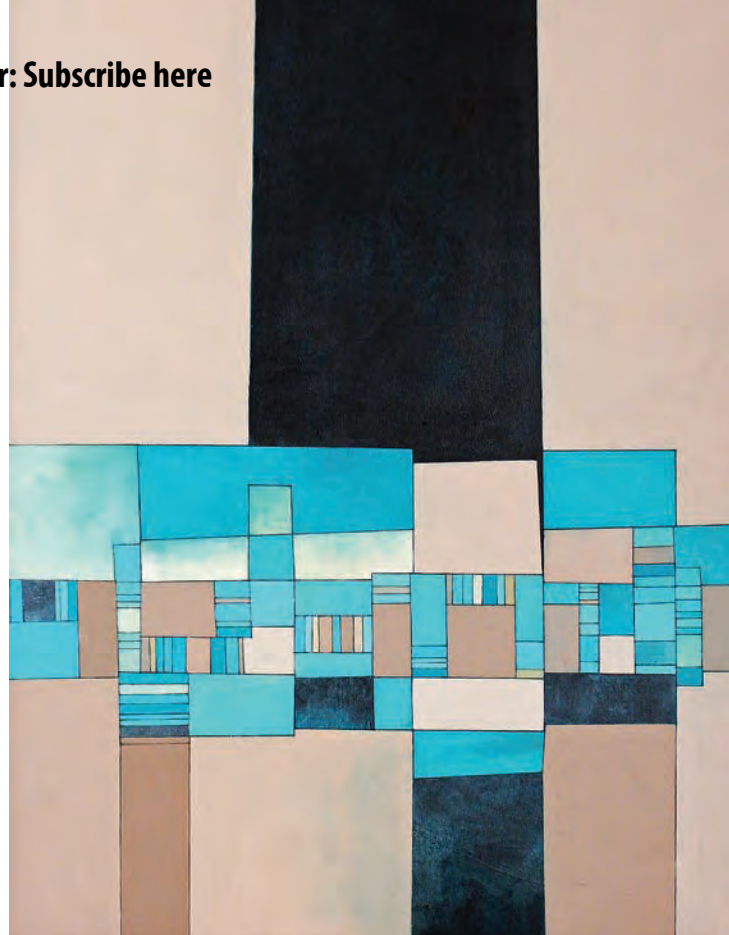
Simply said, the earliest Christians were communists (as Acts tells us of the church in Jerusalem, and as Paul's epistles occasionally reveal), not as an accident of history but as an imperative of the faith. In fact, in preparing my own recent translation of the New Testament, there were many times when I found it difficult not to render the word *koinonia* (and related terms) as something like *communism*. I was prevented from doing so not out of any doubt regarding the aptness of that word, but partly because I did not want accidentally to associate the practices of the early Christians with the centralized state "communisms" of

the twentieth century, and partly because the word is not adequate to capture all the dimensions – moral, spiritual, material – of the Greek term as the Christians of the first century evidently employed it. There can simply be no question that absolutely central to the gospel they preached was the insistence that private wealth and even private property were alien to a life lived in the Body of Christ.

Well into the patristic age, the greatest theologians of the church were still conscious of this. And, of course, throughout Christian history the original provocation of the early church has persisted in isolated monastic communities and has occasionally erupted in local “purist” movements: Spiritual Franciscans, Russian Non-Possessors, the Catholic Worker Movement, the Bruderhof, and so on.

Small intentional communities committed to some form of Christian collectivism are all very well, of course. At present, they may be the only way in which any real communal practice of the *koinonia* of the early church is possible at all. But they can also be a tremendous distraction, especially if their isolation from and simultaneous dependency upon the larger political order is mistaken for a sufficient realization of the ideal Christian polity. Then whatever prophetic critique they might bring to bear upon their society is, in the minds of most believers, converted into a mere special vocation, both exemplary and precious – perhaps even a sanctifying priestly presence within the larger church – but still possible only for the very few, and certainly not a model of practical politics.

Therein lies the gravest danger, because the full *koinonia* of the Body of Christ is not an option to be set alongside other equally plausible alternatives. It is not a private ethos or an elective affinity. It is a call not to withdrawal, but to revolution. It truly enters history as a



**YOU RICH**, how far will you push your frenzied greed? Are you alone to dwell on the earth? . . . Earth at its beginning was for all in common, it was meant for rich and poor alike; what right do you have to monopolize the soil? Nature knows nothing of the rich; all are poor when she brings them forth. Clothing and gold and silver, food and drink and covering – we are born without them all; naked she receives her children into the tomb, and no one can enclose one’s acres there.

*Ambrose of Milan, “On Naboth”*

*final* judgment that has nevertheless already been passed; it is inseparable from the extraordinary claim that Jesus is Lord over all things, that in the form of life he bequeathed to his followers the light of the kingdom has truly broken in upon this world, not as something that emerges over the course of a long

Deborah Batt,  
*Dwelling 10*



**IS NOT THE PERSON** who strips another of clothing called a thief? And those who do not clothe the naked when they have the power to do so, should they not be called the same? The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy.

*Basil of Caesarea, "I Will Tear Down My Barns"*

Deborah  
Batt, *Further  
Development*

historical development, but as an invasion. The verdict has already been handed down. The final word has already been spoken. In Christ, the judgment has come. Christians are those, then, who are no longer at liberty to imagine or desire any social or political or economic order other than the *koinonia* of the early church, no other communal morality than the anarchy of Christian love.

Of course, the political import of this truth – at least, as regards action in the present – must still be sought. As I said at the beginning, I have no answer ready to hand. But, as I also said, we can at least define our

terms. And we can certainly identify which political and social realities must be abhorrent to a Christian conscience: a cultural ethos that not only permits but encourages a life of ceaseless acquisition as a kind of moral good; a legal regime subservient to the corporatist imperative of maximum profits, no matter what the methods employed or consequences produced; a politics of cruelty, division, national identity, or any of the countless ways in which we contrive to demarcate the sphere of what is rightfully “ours” and not “theirs.”

Before all else, we must pursue a vision of the common good (by whatever charitable means we can) that presumes that the basis of law and justice is not the inviolable right to private property, but rather the more original truth taught by men such as Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose of Milan, and John Chrysostom: that the goods of creation belong equally to all, and that immense private wealth is theft – bread stolen from the hungry, clothing stolen from the naked, money stolen from the destitute.

But how to pursue a truly Christian politics at this hour – at least, assuming we hope actually to alter the shape of society – is an altogether more difficult question, and one that perhaps we shall be able to address only if we have truly first learned to disabuse ourselves of the material assumptions that capitalism has taught us to harbor over many generations.

Even so, in light of the judgment that entered human time in Christ, a Christian is allowed to long and hope ultimately for no other society than one that is truly communist and anarchist, in the very special way in which the early church was both at once. Even now, in the time of waiting, whoever does not truly imagine such a society and desire it to come into being has not the mind of Christ. ➤

# Was Martin Luther King

## *a Socialist?*

**BRANDON M. TERRY**

The iconic public philosopher has much to teach today's radicals and visionaries, whatever their politics.

**A**s socialists in America today seek to rebuild a movement that has spent decades on the political margins, they understandably seek to anchor their mission in earlier freedom struggles. Of these, few have more to offer in moral authority and political significance than the civil rights movement and its foremost public philosopher, Martin Luther King Jr.

In left circles, accordingly, it's become an increasingly familiar (and welcome) gesture to remind audiences of King's "radicalism," pushing back against his portrayal as an anodyne consensus figure. Too often, though,

King's indictments of racism, militarism, and materialism are recited as a rote catechism; the full breadth of his vision goes forgotten. This is a shame, and a lost opportunity. There is much in King's legacy of public philosophy from which all sides might learn – the socialists who lay claim to him, and also their opponents.

### **A Secret Red?**

Until recently, the question of King's radicalism remained mostly the province of a handful of scholars and of the Christian left. While this spelled a loss in terms of intellectual history, ironically it also represented a victory of sorts:

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it marked the end of a Cold War–era skirmish over whether King was a socialist subversive, possibly even a full-blown “Red” who colluded with the Soviet Union.

In the wake of King’s assassination, the détente regarding his alleged socialism allowed him to enter the pantheon of American heroes and be ritually celebrated by the state. But the cost of King’s canonization was steep, resulting in a narrowed understanding of his ideals and those of the broader civil rights movement.

During King’s lifetime, his alleged socialism was an obsession within the American security state, fueled by J. Edgar Hoover, director of the

Federal Bureau of Investigation. Hoover, an implacable foe of black political agitation, also used the FBI to undermine figures such as Marcus Garvey, Claudia Jones, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson. The director, admittedly, did not conjure his suspicions



J. Edgar Hoover

about King and communism from thin air. As early as the Montgomery bus boycott (1955–56), King surrounded himself with advisors who had cut their teeth in leftist circles, such as the openly gay socialist and peace activist Bayard Rustin. Worse, from Hoover’s point of view, King relied heavily on the fundraising prowess, speechwriting acumen, and intellectual companionship of Stanley Levison, who, as the FBI “warned” King, was also a prolific fundraiser for the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). That King did not distance himself from Levison at the FBI’s behest left Hoover incensed.

Hoover’s insistence that King was a communist, or at least a communist dupe, served to justify subjecting him to illegal surveillance, sabotage, and harassment, with the approval of both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. When field agents reported no clear-cut

evidence of King’s communism, Hoover ordered them to look harder. As good bureaucrats, they duly manufactured the desired results. After being berated by Hoover, William C. Sullivan, the head of the Domestic Intelligence Division, delivered this infamous assessment of the 1963 March on Washington: “I believe in the light of King’s powerful demagogic speech yesterday he stands head and shoulders over all other Negro leaders put together when it comes to influencing great masses of Negroes. We must mark him now, if we have not done so before, as the most dangerous Negro of the future in this Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro and national security.”

The irony is that, in the end, King likely made more impact on Levison and the communist movement than vice versa. While the FBI could not imagine black intellectuals influencing white ones, it seems that the closer Levison grew to King, the more disillusioned he became with official communism and the CPUSA. King and the surging civil rights revolution became the locus of his hopes for the politics of emancipation.

Though the FBI’s surveillance of King had been initiated as an anti-communist measure, it also reflected Hoover’s conviction that King was a moral hypocrite and a sexual “degenerate.” Indeed, the FBI investigation came to focus so incessantly on sex that this may be its most lasting legacy. Recent allegations by the journalist David Garrow, drawing on declassified FBI memos, charge that King’s indefensible sexism – which I have written about at length elsewhere with the feminist theorist Shatema Threadcraft\* – had more disturbing manifestations than previously known. Yet, as historians

\*Shatema Threadcraft and Brandon M. Terry, “Gender Trouble: Manhood, Inclusion, and Justice” in Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry, eds., *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

like Barbara Ransby have argued, accounts like Garrow's, which rely heavily upon unsourced, unverified, and anonymous FBI agent notations, must be taken with "healthy skepticism." Not only was the FBI often simply inept, but its director and his staff shared a clear mission: to destroy black radicalism.

But was King a "radical" in the socialist sense? Jesse Helms, the legendarily racist North Carolina Republican, certainly thought so. In 1983, during the debate to establish a federal holiday in King's memory, Helms denounced him on the Senate floor as an adherent to the "official policy of communism" and "action-oriented Marxism." Helms's words were widely denounced by his Senate colleagues, but President Ronald Reagan's reaction was more oblique. Asked if he thought King had been a communist sympathizer, the president referred to the eventual declassification of the FBI's secret recordings: "Well, we'll know in about thirty-five years, won't we?"

### A Contentious Legacy

Thirty-five years have passed since Reagan said those words, yet debate over King's socialism still turns a great deal on comments delivered in private and relayed through archival records or secondhand interviews. Among the most cited are off-the-record statements that King delivered at gatherings of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) toward the end of his life. At a 1966 retreat in South Carolina, for example, King insisted that "something is wrong with capitalism," championed Scandinavian forms of social democracy, and argued that there must be "a move toward a democratic socialism." In his 1967 annual address to the SCLC, King declared that the civil rights movement needed to "address itself to the question of restructuring the whole of American society." For King, the fact that an

affluent society had forty million citizens in poverty meant not simply "raising a question about the economic system, about a broader distribution of wealth," but turning to "question the capitalistic economy," the ownership of capital, and the failure of markets to meet vital needs. Perhaps most famously, William Rutherford, an SCLC ally, reported that King privately told him, "Obviously we've got to have some form of socialism, but America's not ready to hear it yet."

Such statements seem to buttress the claim that King became more radical in his later years. Yet there is evidence of continuity in King's views on economic justice dating back to the late 1940s. In undated seminary writings from that period, King predicted that "capitalism has seen its best days in America, and not only in America, but in the entire world . . . it has failed to meet the needs of the masses." In a 1952 love letter to Coretta Scott, King wrote that "I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic," and later, "I would certainly welcome the day to come when there will be a nationalization of industry."

There are, however, two major difficulties with relying upon such statements to adjudicate King's "socialism." The first is that King never articulated them in his published writings, despite a career of careful, considered, and courageous statements on an astonishing range of issues. The second is that these statements contain few specifics fleshing out their relationship to traditional conceptions of socialism, including the abolition of private property or wage labor. In 1967, for example, King demanded that we ask "Who owns the oil?" or "Who owns the iron ore?" but he did not then suggest collective ownership of natural resources or utilities. It is difficult,



Stanley Levison

therefore, to know what would separate King's views from those of liberals such as John Rawls, who argued for the massive redistribution of income and assets and lamented the outsized influence of profit motives and concentrated wealth in capitalist societies. Even if those who call King socialist were clearer about what they thought "socialism" entailed beyond egalitarian distribution and concern for capitalism's corrosive cultural effects, King's statements are not consistent or straightforward enough to be conclusive. We cannot establish him as a committed socialist; we also cannot prove that he wasn't one.

### The Radical King Is Back

This lack of decisive evidence, however, hasn't discouraged interest in King-as-socialist. His name figures prominently in contemporary socialist writing, from Martin Hägglund's *This Life*, a new exploration of the philosophical

**King thought capitalism was "like a losing football team in the last quarter trying all types of tactics to survive."**

foundations of democratic socialism, to Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor's *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and Bhaskar Sunkara's *The Socialist Manifesto*. Leftist publications such as *Jacobin* and *In These Times* have solicited rafts of articles dedicated to King's place in socialist history. The

self-described socialist senator and presidential candidate Bernie Sanders has especially channeled King's iconography, naming his most recent book *Where We Go From Here* after King's 1967 manifesto.

For twenty-first-century socialists in the United States, invoking King serves two obvious needs. First, King combines a blistering critique of racism – including racism *within* the left – with an unapologetically

left-wing vision of economic justice. King never minces words on the role of racism in American inequality, but he also doesn't make the mistake of reducing all black disadvantage to racial discrimination, instead foregrounding broader factors of economic transformation and public policy. This provides him with a critique of black nationalism that is useful for contemporary leftists critical of so-called "identity politics." His thoughts on this in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (1967) are worth quoting at length:

Just as the Negro cannot achieve political power in isolation, neither can he gain economic power through separatism. While there must be a continued emphasis on the need for blacks to pool their economic resources and withdraw consumer support from discriminating firms, we must not be oblivious to the fact that the larger economic problems confronting the Negro community will only be solved by federal programs involving billions of dollars. One unfortunate thing about Black Power is that it gives priority to race precisely at a time when the impact of automation and other forces have made the economic question fundamental for blacks and whites alike. . . . In short, the Negroes' problem cannot be solved unless the whole of American society takes a new turn toward greater economic justice.

Second, King provides a powerful rejoinder to those voices that have successfully demonized socialists as anti-American and contemptuous of religious faith. Unlike this conservative caricature, King developed his most radically egalitarian and politically militant arguments with a reliance on Christian scripture and the Declaration of Independence. In the 1965 sermon "The American Dream," for example, King offers his take on American exceptionalism, proclaiming that "God somehow called





Workers march in Memphis on the 50-year anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, April 2018.

America to do a special job for mankind and the world.” This task, he says, demands that we uproot not only racism, but also the “class system,” which “can be as vicious and evil as a system based on racial injustice.”

Invoking King can be tricky, however, as Senator Sanders recently discovered. At the “She the People” Presidential Forum in Houston in April 2019, he was booed by black women for this innocuous-sounding answer to a question about combating the surge in white supremacist violence: “I was actually at the March on Washington with Dr. King back in 1963, and – as somebody who actively supported Jesse Jackson’s campaign, as one of the few white elected officials to do so in ’88 – I have dedicated my life to the fight against racism and sexism and discrimination of all forms.” There were many factors at work in the audience’s reaction, but surely some of it was a sense that Sanders’s attempt to link his socialism with King smacked of political opportunism.

### Grassroots Democracy

To move beyond cynicism and confusion, it might be best to stop asking whether King was a socialist, and instead ask what King the public philosopher can teach socialists today.

Two elements of King’s thought seem especially important for contemporary controversies around socialism: one, his conception of democracy, and two, his demand for a “radical revolution of values.”

It is striking how quickly contemporary discussions of “democratic” socialism gloss over democratic practice to focus on redistributive public policy. In doing so, they often reduce the involvement of ordinary citizens to voting and contributing to electoral campaigns. Sanders’s interest in democratic socialism, for example, primarily seems to be about the *method* of redistribution (via electoral politics) and a sense that concentrated wealth unfairly devalues democratic citizenship.

Although King is known as a voting rights activist, his wider thinking on democracy is neglected. His most original reflections lay less in the sphere of formal electoral politics than in spheres of democratic action. King saw mass meetings, public arbitration, boycotts, civil disobedience, and civic association as ways to deepen and reinvigorate democratic society, above and beyond voting and legislation. Recounting the failure of Reconstruction to deliver multiracial democracy, King consistently warned that civil rights must not be treated as



permanent achievements but as perpetually vulnerable goods that need to be defended and deepened by vigilant citizen action such as boycott, protest, and civil disobedience.

One goal of state policy, King thought, should be to expand the spaces in which citizens come together to exchange ideas and resist exploitation and domination. For example, while King defended a guaranteed annual income for citizens on the grounds that it respected the dignity of persons, he also thought it might play a powerful role in fostering democratic action. A guaranteed income would allow people to resist domination by employers, bureaucrats, and landlords. Having watched defenders of the status quo in the South punitively and illegally deny employment or welfare benefits to African American activists, King forcefully objected to “uncontrolled bureaucratic or political power” across the full sweep of social life.

To resist such power, King explicitly championed forms of collective organization such as welfare and tenants’ unions, local arbitration boards, and school and transportation boards. In 1967, King described these as “new methods of participation in decision-making” that could bring about a truly integrated society, where power is shared justly. Such organizations *require* the participation of the disadvantaged themselves in order to adequately recognize

their dignity and respond to their needs and perspectives, and to punish arbitrary bureaucratic humiliation and overreach.

Such ideals, King thought, could never be achieved within the boundaries of formal politics alone. They must always be supplemented by traditions of protest and by sustained civic participation. King’s insistence on this is an important contribution toward what the German philosopher Axel Honneth treats as a defining aim of socialism: “a general structure of democratic participation” across the spheres of social life. This concept of distributed democratic power is fundamentally at odds with any socialism that relies on top-down, technocratic policymakers and bureaucracies to pursue its aims. King’s vision does not simply seek to “break up the banks.” It treats enhancing collective decision-making across the gamut of major institutions as a moral and political imperative.

## A Revolution in Values

Crucially, genuine democratic participation across society would also require what King called “a radical revolution in values.” American capitalism, King warned, is shot through with racism, materialism, and militarism in ways that have become structural. “A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years,” King proclaimed in 1967, “will ‘thingify’ them and make them things. And therefore, they will exploit them. . . . And a nation that will exploit economically will have to have foreign investments and everything else, and it will have to use its military might to protect them. All of these problems are tied together.”

Put more sharply, King’s argument treats American capitalism’s valuations as fundamentally irrational, self-undermining, and dangerous. They lead to war-making and rapacious profiteering, the unjust and irrational

allocation of social wealth and power, and the treatment of people – especially poor and racially stigmatized workers – as *things*. As such, these precarious members of the political community have their fate determined by considerations of market efficiency rather than moral equality.

Fundamentally, however, this revolution in values needed to be justified by democracy. “If democracy,” King stated, “is to have breadth of meaning it is necessary to adjust this inequity.” King’s way of framing these questions made it plain to his audience that the values of the existing economic order were not natural or inevitable but, as W.E.B. Du Bois put it in 1920, “strictly controlled” and “not matters of free discussion and determination.” Du Bois imagined supplanting American oligarchy with the “free discussion and open determination of the rules of work and wealth and wages.” Real democracy, he claimed, would place the “scientific and ethical boundaries of our industrial activities . . . in the control of the public whose welfare such decisions guide.” King echoed such a vision when he challenged “a system that has created miracles of production and technology to create justice.”

For King, no principle emergent from capitalism or liberalism could possibly justify the obscenity of endemic poverty alongside extravagant wealth and technological achievement. King condemned such an order, in which the political economy imposes deprivation and degradation upon citizens even in the midst of affluence, as one “as cruel and blind as the practice of cannibalism at the dawn of civilization.”

King’s stridency on this point is instructive. For all of the ambition of the Green New Deal or of proposals for universal health and child care, it’s striking how tied up they still are with the imagination of middle-class strivings. By the end of his life, King had gone far beyond such

Great Society measures to instead declare that “the time has come for us to civilize ourselves by the total, direct, and immediate abolition of poverty.” King’s call to end poverty (and abolish slums) is a challenge even to self-professed democratic socialists today, insofar as it entails confronting the deep historical and racial causes of wealth inequality and rethinking the existing legal order on matters from labor rights to metropolitan boundaries. The sweeping changes these goals demand explain why King used the language of “revolution,” whether he intended the word to have a socialist meaning or not.

In seminary in 1951, King thought capitalism was “like a losing football team in the last quarter trying all types of tactics to survive.” “What will the new movement be called in America?” he wondered, suggesting that the aftermath of capitalism might go by “socialism, communism, or socialistic democracy.” In the end, however, such terms did not matter much: “the point is that we will have a definite change.”

Almost seventy years later, such confidence in a transformed future sounds unfamiliar, as if in a foreign tongue. Today we still live in a nation that, as King said in 1967, is “gorged on money while millions of its citizens are denied a good education, adequate health services, decent housing, meaningful employment, and even respect.” If we want to achieve the “radical revolution in values” that King described, we must move beyond symbolic anti-racism and the rhetoric of radicalism. Taking King’s example seriously would license us to dream at a scale worthy of the catastrophic challenges we face, and perhaps even to imagine a society which – from the vantage of today’s disinherit-ed – truly deserves the name “democracy.” ➤

**We must pose fundamental questions about what, and whom, we value.**

# Working Girls



*Sweatshops never went away.*

**MARIA HENGEVELD**

Laborers work at a garment factory in Bac Giang province, Vietnam, 2015.

**W**OMEN'S EMPOWERMENT SELLS. You-go-girl messages have been used to push everything from shoes to body wash to cars, and it certainly sells in the sports world. In February, Nike released its "Dream Crazier" commercial, featuring female athletes like Simone Biles, Serena Williams, and Megan Rapinoe, and an inspirational voiceover: ". . . a woman running a marathon was crazy. . . . A woman boxing was crazy. A woman dunking? Crazy. Coaching an NBA team. Crazy. A woman competing in a hijab, changing her sport, landing a double cork 1080, or winning twenty-three grand slams, having

a baby, and then coming back for more? Crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy, and crazy."

Nike's been at it for a while now. In fact, my interest in the brand was originally sparked several years ago when I learned about the "girl empowerment" programs that the Nike Foundation, the company's philanthropic arm (now the Nike Community Impact Fund), was promoting in emerging economies like Uganda and Ethiopia. These girl-power programs had made Nike quite popular among women's groups and development organizations. Was this the same Nike that in the mid-1990s had been attacked by feminists and labor activists

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for the widespread abuse in its overseas factories? What about the women making Nike sneakers and T-shirts today? How empowered did they feel? In 2016 those questions took me to Vietnam, where I learned that, contrary to Nike's girl-power image, in reality its factories were still contradicting the freedom and empowerment its commercials celebrate.

I interviewed Hao and three of her colleagues on a hot afternoon in January 2016. I met the workers with an interpreter outside the single room Hao shares with her husband and children, in an industrial area close to Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam's largest city. We sat in a circle on the floor outside and talked about the women's work at a shoe factory that supplies sneakers to Nike.

Hao's story was typical of the eighteen workers, employed at five different Nike suppliers, whom I interviewed that month. She was exhausted by long days, immense work pressure, daily humiliations when her work was deemed too slow or faulty, and the stress of trying to make ends meet on low wages. By the end of the month, Hao often had to borrow money to pay her bills. "I sell lottery tickets during my lunch break," she said, to help pay off debts. This was a risky undertaking, however: "If my boss catches me selling them, he might fire me." Hao had sent her five-year-old daughter to her family in northern Vietnam because she couldn't afford to care for her.

The factory floor is the opposite of empowering. The women showed me wage stubs and factory rule books that revealed illegal wage penalties, excessive hours, and wages four times lower than what they needed to give their families a decent quality of life. Overtime was routine, they said, not voluntary. They weren't allowed to leave after their shifts when deadlines were tight, even though they had children to pick up from school. Of the ten mothers

with young children that I spoke with, six had sent at least one child away out of financial desperation and saw the child only once or twice a year. These women are caught in a Catch-22 of having their families torn apart in an effort to keep them together.

When I confronted Nike with my findings and asked them to respond to the women's grievances, they didn't seem surprised or particularly concerned. "Transformation takes time," they wrote me, suggesting that, while the jobs were not dignified or well-paid – or up to the standards of their "empowerment" campaigns – the labor standards in Vietnam's garment sector would eventually evolve to those in the developed world.

Nike is only one of many multinational brands and retailers, including Gap and H&M, that take part in a system *designed* to push down labor standards. Nike selected Vietnam, a country whose laws forbid independent labor rights groups and strikes, as its primary sourcing destination. The grievances and powerlessness of Hao and her colleagues are not an aberration but a calculated outcome of a system designed to repress workers' struggle for dignified jobs. By prioritizing low production costs and doing business with countries with the weakest labor protections, brands like Nike, Zara, Gap, and H&M create the high-pressure, disempowering environment described by Hao and her colleagues.

**A** S THE HISTORY of America's own garment industry shows, improvements in labor conditions have never "eventually evolved." Unions and strikes are vital. One of the most famous and effective strikes, the "Uprising of the Twenty Thousand," was led by Ukrainian immigrant Clara Lemlich in New York City in November 1909. Work had become unbearable for tens of thousands of

**They weren't allowed to leave after their shifts when deadlines were tight, even though they had children to pick up from school.**

workers, many of them teenage girls, toiling in sweatshops on the Lower East Side. Wages were as low as four dollars per week, work weeks exceeded sixty-five hours, factories were dangerous and unsanitary, and sexual harassment was rampant. Union organizers like

Lemlich knew that the only way to demand a fair share of the profits and force their bosses to improve factory conditions was to use their collective power as workers to shut the industry down.

And that's what they did: for nearly three months, between twenty and thirty thousand garment workers braved the freezing New York winter and walked the streets of Lower Manhattan to demand what they deserved. As the feminist labor historian Annelise Orleck describes in her study, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, the bosses, backed by the city's police, took all kinds of cruel and violent measures against the strikers. Seven hundred women were arrested during the strike, and city officials portrayed them as unruly, immoral, and ungrateful. Lemlich herself was arrested seventeen times and six of her ribs were broken by police clubs.

But, backed by their union, wealthy allies, and sympathetic media coverage, the women persisted. Contrary to what male union leaders thought possible at its outset, the strike achieved many of its goals, including union recognition, a fifty-two-hour workweek, and wage increases. The strike's success proved that collective action in the garment industry was both possible and effective, and set a wave of garment strikes in motion in other cities.

The Uprising's success played an important

role in improving factory conditions in the industry. But its tragic failure played an important role as well. Several factory owners, including Max Blanck and Isaac Harris of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, refused the strikers' demands to fix safety hazards. On March 25, 1911, a year after the conclusion of the Uprising, a fire erupted on the eighth floor of the building, and one hundred forty-six Triangle workers, many of whom had participated in the Uprising, burned or jumped to their deaths.

The deaths of the Triangle fire and the wave of strikes triggered by the Uprising galvanized the labor movement and forced nationwide improvements in working conditions. As Annelise Orleck writes, Lemlich and her organizing colleagues "were at the center of a storm that by 1919 had brought half of all women garment workers into trade unions." Later, much of the progressive labor legislation President Franklin D. Roosevelt adopted was created or inspired by female labor rights advocates who had witnessed, or lost friends to, the fire. Improved conditions were not produced by inevitable evolution, but by the blood and courage of New York's garment workers.

**T**ODAY, JUST AS IT DID a century ago, the garment production industry favors girls and women for employment. As the stereotype goes, women's "nimble fingers" are naturally equipped for fine assembly line work. More importantly, they are considered more docile and less likely to stir up trouble than men. As a factory personnel manager in Taiwan told the anthropologist Linda Gail Arrigo, "young male workers are too restless and impatient to do monotonous work with no career value. If displeased, they sabotage the machines and even threaten the foreman. But girls? At most, they cry a little."

How does this sexist understanding square with the militancy of Clara Lemlich and the tens of thousands who fought for their rights in the early twentieth century? It doesn't: garment workers have always fought for their rights. The difference between 1909 and today is that, whereas then violence against workers happened in front of New York City's shirtwaist-wearing middle and upper classes, today most collective actions by workers, and the methods used to crack down on them, happen largely out of consumers' sight.

The global subcontracting model creates essential distance between western brand managers placing orders and factory managers keeping labor costs as low as possible. The dirty work of union busting has been outsourced along with T-shirt side seams, and it has never been easier for brands to look the other way.

Despite these obstacles, garment workers in Vietnam, Bangladesh, and elsewhere have taken to the streets to demand dignified work and fair wages. In Vietnam in 2008, around twenty thousand workers from subcontracting factories that supplied Nike went on strike for better wages and working conditions. Management fired at least seven women for instigating collective action. When an underground labor group urged Nike to help the women get re-hired by putting pressure on their subcontractors, Charles Brown, Nike's then senior director of global corporate responsibility compliance, hid behind Vietnam's restrictive regime. "It is important," he wrote back, "for workers to understand the boundaries of their legal rights and the rights and obligations of the employer in Vietnam," including, he pointed out, the right of employers to fire striking workers when they don't report to work for five days. Brown makes the country's lack of labor rights sound like a regrettable

surprise. In reality, Nike had chosen Vietnam precisely because of workers' lack of tools to empower themselves.

**T**HE HISTORY of Nike's supply chain and the outsourcing choices illustrate how the "race to the bottom" works under corporate globalization. One of Nike's first outsourcing destinations in the 1970s was South Korea, a country then under military rule, which allowed workers few opportunities to organize. As described at the time by Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes in *Ms. Magazine* and by Ruth Pearson and Diane Elson in the *Feminist Review*, women workers, many living in overcrowded rooms near the factories, faced extremely grim conditions. A sewing-machine operator, Min Chong Suk, wrote of sixteen-hour workdays, starvation wages, and health hazards: "When [the apprentices] shake the waste threads from the clothes, the whole room fills with dust, and it is hard to breathe. Since we've been working in such dusty air, there have been increasing numbers of people getting tuberculosis, bronchitis, and eye disease." To Min Chong Suk, it seemed that "no one knows our blood dissolves into the threads and seams, with sighs and sorrow."

Attempts at collective action by Korean workers were violently squashed in at least one instance by "action squads" that, "armed with steel bars and buckets of human excrement," broke into the women's organizing office and "smashed the office equipment, and smeared the excrement over the women's bodies and in their hair, eyes, and mouths."

When the women succeeded, winning modest wage increases and even helping to bring down the military government, Nike let them down. "In response to South Korean women workers' newfound activist

**Most collective actions by workers, and the methods used to crack down on them, happen largely out of consumers' sight.**

confidence,” Cynthia Enloe writes, “the sneaker company and its subcontractors began shutting down a number of their South Korean factories in the late 1980s and 1990s. . . . Having lost that special kind of workplace control that only an authoritarian government could offer,” Nike

and other European and American sneaker executives moved on to Indonesia, China, and Thailand.

By the early 1990s, “sweatshop exposés” of export factories in Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, Honduras, and other countries finally forced brands to confront the flip side of their outsourcing model: the risk of reputational

damage. Consumers, it turned out, didn’t want to wear shoes or shirts made in sweatshops, and found the hands-off approach of the outsourcing model unconscionable. Activist groups, students, and consumers held the brands responsible.

Nike initially denied responsibility. Why, they asked, should they be held responsible for the workplace practices of its Indonesian business partners? Nike, they argued, is a shoe company, not the United Nations. Besides, a spokesperson pointed out, “The wages may be small, but it’s better than having no job.” The alternative for these women, he suggested, would be “harvesting coconut meat in the tropical sun.” While consumer pressure has motivated brands such as Nike to implement factory oversight systems (which have been criticized as weak, ineffective, and secretive by unions and labor rights experts) the argument that “a bad job is better than no job” is still frequently invoked to justify the conditions under which products and profits are made.

Nike is certainly not alone in this approach. In 2013, a *Huffington Post* reporter asked Biagio Chiarolanza, the CEO of the Italian fashion brand Benetton, about his company’s role in the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh – an industrial accident that cost over 1134 garment workers their lives and that, like the Triangle factory fire in 1911, would have been entirely preventable. Chiarolanza told the journalist that Benetton’s subcontractors, not the company itself, were at fault. When viewed in isolation from the supply chain as a whole, this argument might be convincing to some. But when the suffering and exploitation at the bottom is understood as directly connected to the profits at the top, and as a problem of distribution, rather than an inevitable outcome of outsourcing, it becomes harder to justify. Just as the deadly Triangle fire was a preventable and unnecessary outcome of an asymmetric power relationship, the Rana Plaza disaster was the outcome of a global business system designed to put governments and businesses from the poorest countries in ruthless competition with each other for Western business.

If we allow the excuse that “a bad job is better than no job,” we must accept the extreme power imbalances of modern fashion supply chains as natural and inevitable, rather than see them for what they are: a deliberately designed system of exploitation that should be radically transformed.

**T**HE SEARCH for cheap labor is ongoing. Today, it is leading many brands to a country with no statutory minimum wage for private sector workers: Ethiopia. In 2017, I spent a few weeks in this East African country and, with the support of local research partners, gathered testimonies of over forty garment workers from four factories that



supply H&M and PVH, the company that owns Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger.

At H&M's largest Ethiopian supplier, workers reported unpaid overtime of up to fifty-six hours per month. A twenty-three-year-old woman at this factory recounted that she frequently misses night school classes because her manager won't let her go after her shift ends. When she went anyway, he fined her a full day's wage. The pay stubs and records she and her colleagues provided revealed that they are only paid for a fraction of their overtime. While the average hourly wage of interviewed workers at the factories was eighteen cents, some made as little as twelve cents an hour when unpaid overtime was taken into account. Excessively long hours, sexual harassment, extreme work pressure, and a work climate so hot and dusty that workers frequently collapse at their workstations: the resemblance to the grievances of 1909 is striking. The only way the garment trade will make progress is for workers to find new ways of challenging and correcting the power imbalance that brands and retailers, with the support of political elites, have willfully escalated.

**T**HE IRONY of the Nike Foundation's "empowerment" philanthropy is that true empowerment is exactly what Nike refuses to get behind in its own operations. Its foundation's work is not a generous investment in women's rights, but a smart business investment to restore the company's image. Putting money into their foundation and their communications department, after all, costs them much less than ensuring the women workers get paid a wage high enough to keep their families together. Philanthropic campaigns and "Corporate Social Responsibility" initiatives serve to fix the disjuncture between the

company consumers want to buy from and the one they morally condemn.

Yet it was collective empowerment, through unions, strikes, and the enforcement of labor laws, that improved factory conditions in America between 1910 and 1940. Today, brands don't fear unions, because they have outsourced to countries where independent unions are either weak or non-existent. What brands and retailers do fear is negative exposure – it's proven to be one of the very few things that forces them to do the right thing.

This is precisely why we, and the politicians who represent us on the global stage, should no longer look away. Instead, we should look for new strategies to correct the power imbalances responsible for the unnecessary exploitation and deadly accidents in the factories where our sneakers and T-shirts are made. That means using our power as voters and consumers to demand new kinds of trade deals – trade deals that require strong labor rights and living wages. As Clara Lemlich, tired of discussion over whether or not to strike, said: "I am a working girl. One of those who are on strike against intolerable conditions. I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here for is to decide whether we shall strike or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared now."

Humane hours? Crazy. A living wage? Crazy. Freedom from harassment and humiliation? Crazy. Maternity leave? Crazy. Collective bargaining power and the right to strike? Crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy, and crazy. ➤

**The argument that "a bad job is better than no job" is still invoked to justify the conditions under which products and profits are made.**

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# Not So Simple

Notes from a Tech-Free Life

MARK BOYLE

**Who hasn't dreamed of living a more wholesome, less frenetic life? Ten years ago economist Mark Boyle tried living without money. Two years ago he foreswore modern technology as well. We asked him what he's learned since he ditched his stupidphone and logged off antisocial media.**

**A**round eleven p.m. the night before the winter solstice of 2016 I unplugged my laptop and turned off my phone for what I hoped would be forever. I had just put the finishing touches to a straw-bale cabin that I'd spent the summer building on the three-acre, half-wild smallholding where I live. The following morning I intended to begin a new life without modern technology. There would be no running water, no fossil fuels, no clock, no electricity or any of the things it powers: no washing machine, internet, phone, radio, or light bulb. I was not under the illusion that it was going to be a romantic, bucolic idyll, as it is sometimes portrayed to be. For one, I planned to live directly from the landscape around me without chainsaw, power tools, or tractor.



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I woke up the next morning with mixed feelings. On the one hand I felt that sense of liberation that comes from paring things back to the raw ingredients of life, and no longer having bills; on the other, that sense of apprehension that comes with giving up everything you've ever known, in effect burning your bridges to modernity. Right then I had no idea if unplugging from the industrial world would mean I'd lose all touch with reality, or finally discover it.

## Living without Money

Eight years earlier I had begun living without money in what was originally intended to be a one year experiment into what anthropologists call "gift culture." I wanted to see if it were possible and, if it were, what it looked and felt like. This hadn't been a light-hearted decision. With a background in economics and business,

## Would unplugging from the industrial world mean I'd lose all touch with reality, or finally discover it?

I came to the sobering conclusion that at the heart of our ecological, geopolitical, social, and cultural malaise was our extreme disconnection from the sources of what we consume. Money, I reasoned, allowed us to never have to

come eye-to-eye with the consequences of our consumerist ways. The wider the degrees of separation, the more room for abuse. But while renouncing money certainly helped me extricate myself from the jaws of rapacious capitalism, I hadn't escaped industrialism. At the time I used solar panels, which powered some of the things only monetary, industrialized economies can provide: LEDs, a laptop, and gadgets of all sorts. I grew uncomfortable with this and slowly came to feel that it wasn't just monetary economics and

capitalism at the heart of the convergence of crises facing us. It was also industrialism.

I don't write much these days about the reasons I have unplugged myself from industrial civilization. This is in part because, deep down, we know them too well already, and it's not for want of information that we continue down that path. I could name a few: the mass extinction of species; resource wars; cultural imperialism; climate catastrophe; widespread surveillance; standardization; the colonization of wilderness and indigenous lands; the fragmentation of community; the automation of millions of jobs with the inevitable inequality, unemployment, and purposelessness that ensue (providing fertile ground for demagogues to take control); the stark decline in mental health; the rise in industrial-scale illnesses such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes, depression, autoimmune diseases and obesity; the tyranny of fast-paced, relentless communication; and the addictiveness of the hollow excitement (films, pornography, TV series, new products, celebrity gossip, dating websites, 24/7 news) that exists behind our screens, the goal of which seems to be the monetization of our distraction.

These concerns all still matter immensely. Yet, surprisingly, over time I found my reasons slowly change. They now have less to do with saving the world, and much more to do with savoring the world. The world needs savoring.

## Bare Bones

I wanted to put my finger on the pulse of life again. I wanted to feel the elements in their enormity, to strip away the nonsense and lick the bare bones of existence clean. I wanted to know intimacy, friendship, and community, and not just the things that pass for them. Instead of spending my life making a living, I wanted to make living my life.

Most of all, I wanted to be an animal, to be fully human. I wanted to feel cold and hunger and fear. I wanted to live, not merely exhibit the signs of life, and when the time came, to be ready to go off into the woods, calmly and clearly, and let the life there feed on my flesh, just as I had done on theirs. Crows eating out my eyes, a fox gnawing at my face, a feral dog chewing on my bones, a pine marten making good use of my leg meat. It only seemed fair.

At this point you're probably thinking that here is someone with acute masochistic tendencies. I could hardly blame you. Strangely, the opposite is closer to the truth. Words like "giving up," "living without," and "quitting" are always in danger of sounding limiting and austere, drawing attention to the loss instead of what might be gained. Alcoholics are more likely to be described as "giving up the booze" than "gaining good health and relationships." In my experience, loss and gain are an ongoing part of all of our lives. Choices are always being made whether we know it or not. Throughout most of my life, for reasons that made perfect sense, I chose money and machines, unconsciously choosing to live without the things they have replaced. The question concerning each of us, then, one we too seldom ask ourselves, is: What are we prepared to lose, and what do we want to gain, as we fumble our way through our short, precious lives?

### Complexifying

This way of life I have now adopted is often called "the simple life," but that's entirely misleading. It's actually quite complex, made up of a thousand simple things. By contrast, my old life in the city was quite simple, but made up of a thousand complex things, like smartphones and plug sockets and plastic. The innumerable technologies of industrial civilization are so



complex they make our own lives simple.

Too simple. I, for one, got bored doing the same thing day in, day out, using complex technologies that, I suspected, made those who manufactured them bored too. That's partially why I rejected them. With all the switches, buttons, websites, vehicles, devices, entertainment, apps, power tools, gizmos, service providers, comforts, and conveniences surrounding me, I found there was almost nothing left for me to do for myself; except, that is, to earn money to acquire all these things. So, as Kirkpatrick Sale wrote in *Human Scale*, my wish became "to complexify, not simplify."

Living without running water, electricity, or machines, my life has certainly become more complex. Having no flush toilet, I start the day emptying the composting toilet into one of the



Photograph by Hunter Brumels (public domain)

composting bays, which in eighteen months' time will be used to grow food. From there it's off to the spring to fetch the day's washing and drinking water. Along the way I meet and chat with neighbors. After that it could be any number of things: making cider, hauling logs from the forest, sawing and chopping them by hand, foraging plants and berries, manuring vegetable beds, planting trees, skinning a roadkill pheasant or deer, planting seeds, weeding the herb garden, washing in the lake, whittling a spoon. Or any of a hundred other things modernity had once done for me.

What I think people mean by "the simple life" is the uncomplicated essence of it all, and, yes, there is a timeless simplicity to it. I've found that when you peel off the plastic that industrial civilization vacuum-packs around you, what remains couldn't be simpler. Healthy food. Something to be enthusiastic about. Fresh air. A sense of belonging and aliveness. Good water. Purpose. Intimacy. A vital and deep connection to life. The kind of things I did without for too many years.

Part of our longing is for a deeper sense of connection with other people. When I first decided to quit complex technologies, my biggest concern was that I'd cut myself off from my family, friends, and the rest of

society. After all, that society is now organized through smartphones, websites, email, and social media. Yet the opposite has proven true. I now stay in touch with those I care about by letter, the writing of which provokes an entirely different quality of thought and expression than email or text. I've never been more social with my neighbors and those dear to me since giving up social media, and many people come and stay in the free hostel we host on our smallholding. Just as importantly, I've come to value quiet, reflective time with landscape and wildlife as much as time with people.

## What I Eat

My relationship to food, and thus the world around me, has changed dramatically. When I lived without money, I was an animal rights activist, and strictly vegan for over a decade. These days I live from the landscape around me. Most dinners consist of the pike or trout I catch, the greens or berries I forage, the potatoes and vegetables and salads I grow, and any roadkill – mostly deer, pheasant, or pigeon – that I come across. It's not to everyone's taste, but I know where my food comes from, I know what it entails, and I've never been more aware that my own life depends upon the intimacy of my connection to this landscape.

That change wasn't easy. I love wildlife, and so I take life with the reluctance of one who needs to eat. But I harm more life in the soil from one morning's gardening than I do in a year's fishing. While I'm as opposed to cruelty as ever, I no longer have a problem with death. Death is life, and nothing exists without it. The problem is scale, and the disconnection it confers. I also felt my previous, so-called vegan life wasn't even vegan. Cars aren't vegan. Phones aren't vegan. Plastic isn't vegan. Tubs of vitamins aren't vegan. Protein bars, chickpeas, soya and hemp seeds – none of it is vegan, not really. It's

all the harvest of a political ideology that is causing the sixth mass extinction of species, one that is wiping out one habitat after the next and polluting the world around us, making the Earth uninhabitable for much of life – even ourselves.

## Liberation from the Clock

When I quit modern technology, I also wanted to give up time. Obviously not seasonal time and the inescapable natural rhythm of day and night; I mean clock-time. I appreciate that this may sound fanciful, impractical, and odd, but it is at the heart of the way of life I want to lead. Reading Jay Griffiths's deep exploration of time, *Pip Pip*, reinforced in my mind how recent the concept of clock-time is in human culture, and how essentially ideological and political it is. Clock-time is central to industry, mass production, specialized division of labor, economies of scale and standardization – basically everything I am trying to move away from. In her typical poetic prose, Griffiths calls Greenwich Mean Time the “meanest time of all.”

As I have no clock, my relationship with time has changed dramatically. Things do take longer. There is no electric kettle to make my tea in three minutes, no supermarket to pop into for bread and pizza. But here's the odd bit: I find myself with more time. Writing with a pencil, I can't get distracted by clickbait or advertising. Life has a more relaxed pace, with less stress. I feel in tune not only with seasonal rhythms but also with my own body's rhythm. Instead of an alarm clock, I wake up to the sounds of birds, and I've never slept better. If I want to drop everything and go hiking, I can. I am finally learning to “be here now.” There's more diversity, less repetition. Mindfulness is no longer a spiritual luxury, but an economic necessity. While this may not be the most profitable career path, it's good for my own bottom line: happiness.

## Romanticizing Simplicity?

Not everything has been easy – far from it. With no phone, there's no more calling faraway family and friends, no text message to meet a mate at the pub. Washing crouched in an aluminum tub with a jug of water is as unromantic as it sounds. But I've learned that this way of life has its own pattern, with old, forgotten solutions. Instead of getting endless emails, text messages, and calls, I receive one or two letters a day, and these matter to me. Eventually I built an outdoor hot tub, and soaking under the stars with a glass of homemade blackberry wine is as romantic as it sounds.

I've found that when you say no to one thing, you are saying yes to another. Take music, for example. The day I rejected the immortalizing world of television, radio, and the internet, it was as if all the world-famous artists I loved died at once. No more Bowie or Joni Mitchell. There's a strange sadness about that. But quitting electronic music prompted me to start going to live traditional music sessions, and I love that now. I'm even learning to play (badly) myself.

I don't romanticize the past. But I don't romanticize the future either. I've lived with tech and without, and I know which one brings me most peace and contentment. Aldo Leopold once said that “we all strive for safety, prosperity, comfort, long life, and dullness.” It's all too easy to live a long time without having ever felt alive. In the unceasing tradeoff between comfort and that feeling of being fully alive, for most of my life I was failing to find the right balance. Now I want to feel all of the emotions and elements in their entirety. The rain, the joy, the wonder – all of it. ➤

**I've never been more social with my neighbors and those dear to me since giving up social media.**

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# The Teacher Who Never Spoke

MAUREEN SWINGER

How my brother who could never walk or talk  
coached dozens of his peers into manhood

**T**HE SUMMER my brother Duane turned twenty, a formidable young man stayed with us on a break from the Ivy League. He had never, to anyone's knowledge, lost an argument. Several weeks into his visit, my mother walked into the dining room where my brother and his friend were, in theory, eating lunch. In reality, both men were sitting at the table with locked jaws. One didn't have to say, "I need you to eat." The other didn't need to say, "Hell, no." They both knew exactly what was going on: the Ivy Leaguer was losing an argument to my brother, who had never learned to speak.

Duane was born healthy, as far as anyone could tell, but when he was three months old he was attacked by his first grand-mal seizure, with countless more to follow. He was diagnosed with Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, a rare form of epilepsy, and his seizures were so brutal that the doctors didn't think he'd live out the year. That one year turned into thirty-one and a half.

Often when I tell people about my brother, I see questions in their faces: "Why was he

ever born? Why put him through needless suffering? Why dedicate your family's time and energy to a hopeless case? Why spend all that money?" These questions reflect a worldview so widely accepted today that most people don't even realize they hold it: that of utilitarianism. Yet its principles are constantly invoked in debates over right or wrong, for instance in regard to abortion or physician-assisted suicide.

Most famously advanced by John Stuart Mill, utilitarianism argues that an action is good only because it maximizes a given benefit. This school of thought's most prominent champion today is the Australian philosopher Peter Singer, a professor of bioethics at Princeton University. In Singer's version of utilitarianism – which is in many ways just an especially forthright articulation of our culture's worldview – to act ethically means to seek to maximize the satisfaction of people's desires. This, in Singer's view, also means that we must seek to minimize the suffering of people unable to have or express preferences – if necessary, through terminating their lives before or after birth. People such as Duane.

*Opposite,  
Federico Marcolla,  
Sacred Gaze*

In 1980, the “save the children from existing” philosophy hadn’t reached southwest Pennsylvania, where my parents lived. And before Duane’s birth, they had no idea there was anything different about him. But if they had known, I know what my parents would have said: “He’s our son.”

Nobody knows how much Duane could understand. In one aptitude test, he showed no interest in differentiating a red square from a yellow triangle, and the neurologists told us that he had the cognition of a three-month-old. We were amused. How do you measure intelligence in someone so full of life, whose constant seizures played havoc with his memory and situational awareness? Snapshot neurological tests can’t capture the reality of his life.

Can Singer or other utilitarians do any better than the neurologists? For many in this camp, not all members of the human species are considered persons. Personhood, they argue, requires self-awareness and the ability to conceive of future goals and plans: to experience oneself as having interests. Duane would not have qualified. In his case, utilitarianism would say that another good – reducing suffering – should have kicked in. No doubt Singer would allow that my parents’ preference to keep Duane alive should have weight (after all, they are “persons,” even if he supposedly wasn’t). But still, by Singer’s account, there was nothing in Duane himself that could have made it wrong to kill him.

Christians do not think like this. In Christian terms, an action is good not only because it has beneficial consequences, but because it is good in itself. What’s more, good actions have the power to change for the better those who do them. We seek to love like God – to be merciful, honorable, and just – because we want to reflect his character: to “become like Christ,”

to grow into “the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” as Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians. It is this *becoming* that guides our decisions, because all choices change us – in one direction or another.

## Wheelchairs and Fireworks

But I can’t leave these questions in the safe world of abstractions. I wish you could have known my brother.

To someone glancing toward him once, only to quickly look away, this was Duane: A lanky body in a high-support wheelchair, eyes often vacant, staring a hole in the ceiling. One of his wrists was noticeably contracted, and yes, he drooled.

But talk to anyone who spent time with him, and none of them will mention this. Because that wasn’t essential to who he was. And part of my bone-deep conviction that Singer’s arguments are wrong is my experience of Duane as a person. Whatever his level of intellectual development, he was *someone*. Someone who, even in Singer’s terms, had interests, someone who had a good purpose for which he was made.

Who was this someone? He had an impish grin, a mischievous sideways glance from coffee-brown eyes that you only saw if you were at eye level – and if he wasn’t in a post-seizure daze.

He derived enormous satisfaction from the little things that made up his day. You earned a huge smile just for shifting him to a more comfortable position. Kids fiddling with the knobs on his chair were enough to bring on the giggles. If he was watching fireworks, he would laugh till he choked. “Breathe, D, breathe!” we’d beg. Then, whoosh . . . BOOM! The next one lit the sky, and D was off again. And when he was mad the world knew that too. If he had tired of

sitting around at church or at dinner, he'd let you know with a "get-me-out-of-here" roar.

The five of us siblings were born within the space of five years, with D right in the middle of the lineup. As kids we prayed confidently for miraculous healing, sure that the next morning he'd run out of his room to meet us. But sooner or later, the realization caught up with each of us: D is D, and he's here, as he is, for a reason.

That discovery didn't make life easier for our family. We can scan back over thirty-one years and celebrate the wondrous times. But slowing the frames, more lonely scenes come into view: the sleepless nights, the sprints to the hospital, the ache we sometimes felt of always being different.

To be sure, we were among the most supported of families caring for a child with special needs. As young people, my parents had joined the Bruderhof, a movement founded on Jesus' call to love one another. We lived in an intentional community of three hundred people committed to serving each other throughout life. Duane, in short, could not have landed anywhere better. And yet, even this did not supply his story with a tidy happily-ever-after.

While Duane was a young child, our family managed all of his home care. During the day the teachers at the Bruderhof's children's center included him in his peer group's activities. That worked, mostly, until he reached his teens. By then, he was taller than my dad, and if a seizure started during a transfer to or from his wheelchair, he could hurl himself and his caregiver to the ground. Starting in ninth grade, he spent his days off the community premises, at a school for children with special needs.

Our team of siblings had by now developed into a capable crew of nursing aides, cooks, and errand runners, all of us proud to "manage"



Duane at age five (*above*); with the author (*middle*); and with his parents, Jeremy and Mengia Bazeley (*bottom*)

looking after Duane. (My brother Evan was the first responder, with a knack for sleeping through Duane's deafening happy noises, but waking the moment he heard the muffled grunts of a grand-mal seizure starting.) Nobody but us witnessed the crazy nights, and we didn't

talk about them. We hardly realized ourselves how worn down we were getting.

From the outside, it looked fine. Duane could go anywhere and be met with joyous greetings. People in the community cared about him. But not many truly knew him, or ever met *him* without a family member or aide at his side.

In retrospect, I see how much our family, all rather stubborn individualists, benefited from those often-strenuous years. Would we ever have become a team if we hadn't been tested? We discovered that love is action – often the same action over and over. We learned that prayer had better come before any action.

We also learned that encouraging words from others had their place, but that some expressions backfired. Take the word *gift*. People often told us what a gift Duane was. And yes, he was a gift, wrapped in incredibly complex packaging, a present that could tear your heart in two. But hearing the word, I was sometimes only just able to bite back a snarky “Would you like to do the night shift with our gift?”

In the end, this was the form of love that we learned to value: someone showing up to take Duane on a walk. Someone hosting a fireworks show for his birthday. Someone looking him in the eye and saying, “How’s it going?” without worrying about getting an answer.

## Becoming a Teacher

Then a new pastor arrived at the Bruderhof community where we lived in upstate New York. Richard Scott was funny, British, not too tall, and very perceptive. He looked Duane in the eye, and Duane looked back. Richard didn't only see a boy in a wheelchair who needed complex care. He saw a teacher without any students, a missionary without a mission field.

And he noticed something else: that other young men in the community, despite hearing about dedication and service all their lives, can easily hit their twenties without any significant testing – and perhaps without much motivation beyond sports, music, or self-serving career ambitions.

Richard wasn't only worried about these young men's futures but also about the community's present. If we weren't finding a place for Duane to help work for the kingdom among us, didn't that indicate a kind of blindness – an inability to see as Christ sees? These concerns came to an unexpected head at one community meeting in which we were reading together from an essay

by Bruderhof founder Eberhard Arnold:

Again and again, what it amounts to is a clash between two opposing goals: One goal is to seek the person of high position, the great person, the spiritual person, the clever person . . . the person who because of his natural talents represents a high peak, as it were, in the mountain range of humanity. The other goal is to seek the lowly people, the minorities, the disabled, the prisoners: the valleys of the lowly between the heights of the great. . . . The first goal aims to exalt the individual, by virtue of his natural gifts, to a state approaching the divine. In the end he is made a god. The other goal seeks the wonder and mystery of God becoming man, God seeking the lowest place among us.

At these words, my father cried out, leaped from his chair, and ran out of the room weeping. The rest of my family was frozen in place. After all, Arnold's words, though vivid, expressed a familiar idea, one we'd heard in church before. Perhaps we were a little too used to hearing it.

**Nothing  
you've  
excelled at  
till now  
counts for  
much.**

It is not that Christianity glorifies suffering for its own sake. Even Jesus suffered on the cross “for the sake of the joy that was set before him.” It is not that Christian teaching denies that sickness should, and will, be healed. Rather, we are convinced that God is in the business of exalting the lowly, that he takes his place in the frailest of bodies, that his “power is made perfect in weakness.”

My father heard that truth in Arnold’s words that day. So did Richard. And in a community meeting not long afterward, he offered a startling proposal: what if Duane came home from his school for special needs – to teach? What if a new generation of young men became his students?

What happened next was nothing short of a revolution. The young men stepped up, and Duane’s life took an astounding new turn.

## The School of Duane

Are you ready to be Duane’s student? Your crash course includes pushing his tricycle for hours, massaging his thin legs to relieve muscle cramps, and getting more oatmeal into his mouth than onto his shirt. It also includes finding that nothing you’ve excelled at till now counts for much here. Best tackle on the field? Meaningless. D needs help simply turning over in bed. Straight-A student? Who cares? D never even graduated from kindergarten. You’re sociable, clever? Useless. Conversations are basically a one-way street.

The real kicker is standing by him through a seizure. You can do nothing to stop or ease it. All you can do is keep him clear of hard surfaces and stroke his shaking shoulder. Then he will fall asleep for hours, leaving you with another assignment – the lesson of quiet. Life is not always a party with continuous background noise and witticisms flying. There must also be hours when you weep for lost chances

and lost people and lost time. In turn, those hours can give way to a silence in which you begin to hear God’s hope for your life. Duane could take people there.

Duane shredded many of the rules we so often unwittingly live by: “Get ahead,” “Don’t commit yourself,” “Watch your back.” They all seem necessary – even as they drag us down under a burden of self-protection that leaves no room for costly obligations, or for love.

Dozens of young men now had the chance to change those rules.

So the household expanded, and two caregivers at a time came to live with us, rotating nights in D’s room. Gaining a crew of adopted sons, my parents also rediscovered the benefits of an eight-hour night. My mom, a legend among alumni of the School of Duane for her five-star bakery, was continually startled at the speed at which her cinnamon rolls disappeared.

My parents prayed for each of these young men, knowing that they often came to Duane’s door at a time when their own forward momentum had stalled. Some were not sure of their faith. Some were not sure of their future. Some were letting go of a love that wasn’t meant to be, and some didn’t yet know what love was.

What Duane taught varied from person to person. But nobody graduated from his school unchanged. After he died, my parents were inundated with letters. One man wrote,

During my early twenties my life was fraught with struggle and confusion, till I got the chance to care for Duane. . . . He taught me that I really didn’t know it all, that I had to start caring for others first . . . that perfection and strength as God sees them were utterly different from my previous strivings for those qualities. I don’t know where I’d be without having known him.

Duane's care was physically and mentally demanding. You could never park him an inch too close to the table, or forget to set his brakes. Transfers from bed to chair required both gentleness and strength. Through it all, D was patient. Yes, he could holler when he had to, but he trusted you through everything that didn't go right.

Caring for him was also fatherhood training. Graduates of Duane's school could face whatever came along with humor, patience, and grace: basic nursing, daunting diapers, or a string of sleepless nights. They learned leadership, humility, and the necessity of prayer. Many future families were to benefit.

## Gaining a Guardian

As my parents reached their sixties, my brother Brendan and his wife Miriam stepped up their support, becoming de facto house parents and Duane-team guides. Their kids sang Duane awake in the mornings and played catch with their teddy bears in his big, high-railed bed. My parents had always dreamed of visiting Europe, and now a small community in Germany invited them for an extended stay. They asked Brendan and Miriam to become Duane's legal guardians – “but,” with a twinkle, “we are still his parents!”



Their travels were punctuated by phone calls, checking in with base camp. Brendan gave updates; Duane grinned at the familiar but insubstantial voices. Any changes in therapy or medication were discussed with the home team, the parents-on-tour, and the community's medical staff. It proved to be a stable triangle.

Duane had always had the best possible medical care. His doctors, who were members of our community, had known him since babyhood. They had seen Duane through several intensive surgeries for seizure management (with varying positive results; none was a magical cure). Through good, bad, and downright wretched days, they had loved him like a son. If Dr. Jonathan Zimmerman looked over some heads at a church service and didn't like Duane's color, he'd appear with his stethoscope afterwards, and he wouldn't leave till he had things figured out.

Still, when Duane turned thirty, no one would have guessed he was heading into his final year. He had outlived plenty of specialists' predictions. Meanwhile, though, his old friend Richard was dying of cancer. Perhaps his own impending mortality made Richard aware of something we couldn't yet see. One evening, he spoke to Brendan and Miriam with the directness of one who does not have many words left: “When Duane's time comes, let him go. You

## L'Arche: A Two-Way Training Ground

*Photography by Warren Pot and Tomasz Sewilski*

**L'Arche communities** are made up of people with and without disabilities sharing life. At the heart of L'Arche is a belief in the sacredness and unique value of each person and a recognition that everyone can contribute.

and I know that he'll get the best medical care in the world. But don't try to stop him from going home."

Richard died on February 7, 2011. For Duane, there was one more summer full of his favorite things: chilling by the lake with burgers and a beer, quality time with old friends, fireworks. Alumni dropped in, now with families in tow, to introduce their kids to their teacher. But when his parents came home from their travels, they saw a change in his eyes.

By September, it was clear that Duane's body was beginning to wear out. After years of tireless care, his medical team had to face the fact that nothing further could be accomplished except in the way of pain relief. As our family talked through hard decisions, we knew: after more years with him than we thought we'd ever get, his time was coming to an end.

Through a cold autumn, he was mostly in bed. His visitors ranged from medical staff to the community's kindergarten class, always ready to break into raucous song. He had his enormous picture window and his favorite meals, when he wanted them. But he was partly elsewhere; when I spoke to him, he looked through me and then pulled back his gaze as if focusing on someone two feet away was difficult after peering into eternity.



He died so quietly that his brother Gareth, holding his hand, could hardly tell when he'd gone. But his eyes, which had been glazed and half-closed all day, were wide open and clear. He had not smiled in days; he was smiling. And it was a smile of surprised, joyous awe.

Just before his funeral, our family found ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder around him in the pattern we had adopted over the years: D as the hub, we as the spokes. We looked down at his still face in the pine casket, and marveled at his thirty-one intensely lived years.

Brendan read from *Adam, God's Beloved*, an account of Henri J. M. Nouwen's time caring for a young man with a condition similar to Duane's:

While looking at Adam's quiet face, we prayed in gratitude for the gift of his years of life, and for all that he had brought to us in his great physical weakness and incredible spiritual strength. . . . Here is my counselor, my teacher, and my guide, who could never say a word to me, but taught me more than any book, professor, or spiritual director. He is dead now. His life is over. His task is accomplished. . . . I felt an immense sadness, but also an immense gladness. I'd lost a companion and gained a guardian for the rest of my life.

There were a handful of guys from the National Guard at the funeral. Those men, young, strong, and healthy, shoveled the earth into Duane's

These photos show some of the ways members take care of each other: cooking, shopping, creating art, dancing, and celebrating moments big and small together.

grave, saluting someone who could never stand on his own. I pictured Duane now, free from pain in his resurrected body, throwing his shoulders back, standing to his full six feet, and, free of the wheelchair, breaking into a joyous sprint.

## The Upside-Down Truth

What was Jesus talking about when he said that the last will be first, and why does he accord such honor to “the least of these”? He calls them his brothers. He says that the door to his kingdom will open to the people who spend time with them, even if they are just offering a glass of water.

When he says “last” and “least,” Jesus is talking the language of our present world, not of his kingdom; he is pointing out the position to which we relegate people we see as unimportant. But he also says that his kingdom is not an otherworldly domain of future happiness for good people. It’s a real, boots-on-the-ground, right-now kingdom happening around us. What if “the least” are actually powerful commandos making inroads for their leader in enemy territory?

At Duane’s graveside, in the November sunlight, our family stood surrounded by more than three hundred of his friends. From out of the crowd, Alan, born with Noonan Syndrome,

marched up and stood between my parents. I could almost hear D saying, as he passed the torch to his younger comrade, “Go get ’em, tiger. Crack some more hearts open.”

To crack a cold heart, to train it in love, is the most liberating service any person can do for another. These gifts do not show up on an ultrasound. They aren’t mentioned in the first diagnosis of disability. They aren’t measured by tests, and they aren’t included in studies on compassionate euthanasia.

And that’s why Duane’s story is more than a tale of a great kid growing up in a caring family, and more than a testament to the abstract idea that all people’s lives have value. There are people living bravely with disabilities everywhere. Many have strong networks of care, and many are devastatingly alone. Are the healthy individuals who pass them by, though, less alone? Perhaps it is isolation from humanity that breeds the sort of clinical coldness that suggests the removal of suffering by removing the one who suffers. Could the quest to eliminate others’ suffering be a disguised attempt to distance *ourselves* from pain, because we fear there is no way through it?

My father heard a quote during a church service, and in that moment all the hurt stored up over the years erupted for everyone to see. Yet his love and care continued quietly



Many assistants come to L'Arche wanting to help those in need. They often are surprised to discover that the members with disabilities become *their* teachers and mentors, in matters of the heart and in becoming fully human.



through all the years to come, steadied by faith and humor. My mother wept at the graduations of Duane's classmates, and at their weddings. Yet while grieving deeply for what could never be, she completely embraced what was. Is it possible to protect ourselves from grief? What if we end up protecting ourselves from love?

To reach through this pain to the love beneath, we need resources beyond the imagination of utilitarians like Peter Singer. Yes, Duane "provided value" to many. Yes, our lives are richer because he was in them. But my parents, and the other members of the Bruderhof, were not waiting to see if this would be the case before they decided whether Duane was worthy of regard. He did not need to prove to anyone that he was an asset. It was the reverse: he was able to contribute because his community knew that he was valuable anyway, as a brother. His presence with us brought the image of God to light – within him *and* within those who cared for him.

**To crack a cold heart, to train it in love, is the most liberating service any person can do for another.**

Duane's claim to be "someone who counts" didn't depend on his being (to use Singer's language) biographically aware of himself as having interests. His life, like all our lives, is sacred because he, like the rest of us, was drafted into this existence, into this peace-bringing army of the sons of Adam. Our duties are assigned, and we may not go absent without leave.

This wisdom is not in any ethics textbook. Those attempting to determine what is right or wrong for people like Duane ought to come live alongside – but only if they are ready to have some ethics applied in the reverse direction. That's how dozens of young men came to experience this truth, which the utilitarian project rejects as an outmoded relic. These students thank Duane – my brother and theirs – for an education that completely overturned their judgments of value and success. At the end of the line, they encountered the last; then the whole line turned, and the last was in the lead. ➤

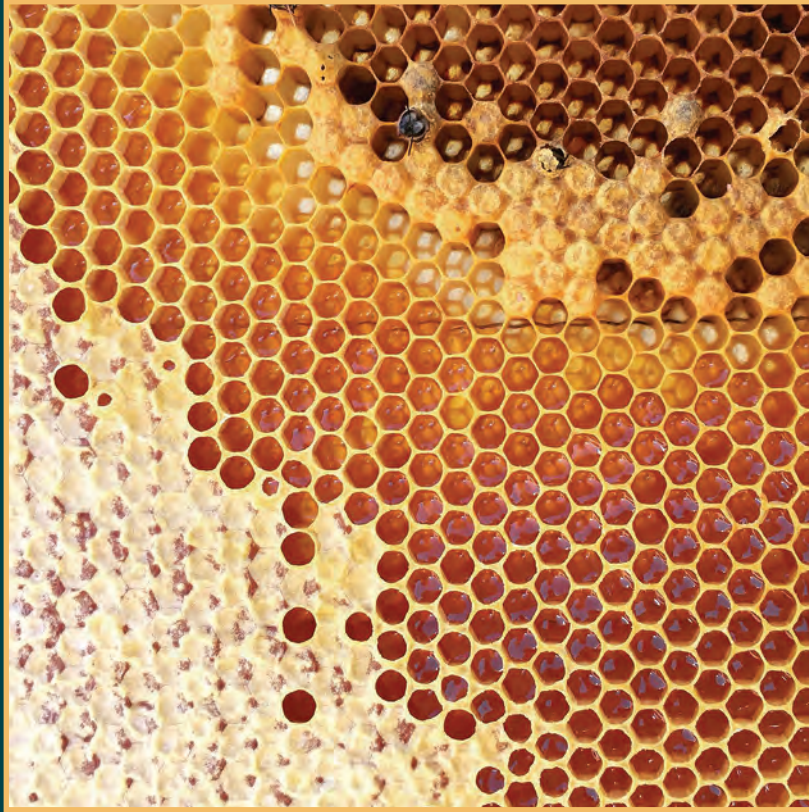
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L'Arche was founded in 1964 by Canadian humanitarian Jean Vanier. There are now over 140 L'Arche communities in the world. For more information visit [larche.org](http://larche.org).

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**“The way to use money is not so easily discovered as some would think, for it is not one of God’s ready means of doing good. The first question is not how to do good with money, but how to keep from doing harm with it.” — George MacDonald**

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