

Try Learning Not to Ride a Bicycle So We Can Save the World

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"Who would study and describe the living, starts /By driving the spirits out of the parts: /In the palm of his hand he holds all the sections, /Lacks nothing, except the spirit's connections." - Mephistopheles warning to the student in Goethe's Faust

"And how far would you like to go in?" he asked and the three kings all looked at each other. "Not too far but just far enough so's we can say that we've been there." - Liner notes to Bob Dylan's John Wesley Harding album

"The shadow is what I am but will not admit I am. For the shadow of the psyche involves me in a deepening self-recognition which is more humiliating and emptying than the normal limits of endurance. In the end, acknowledging the shadow means acknowledging a bottomless void within me. The initial question of truth-force is: How deeply will I acknowledge my own emptiness?" - James W. Douglass, Lightning East to West: Jesus, Gandhi, and the Nuclear Age

We are haunted by a specter. Strange as it may sound, I was reminded of this when I saw a photograph of the quarterback of the Super Bowl winning Philadelphia Eagles, Nick Foles, looking and pointing up to the heavens. Or to be more precise, the roof of the aptly named U.S. Bank Stadium, a fitting venue for a national celebration of violence and the warfare state. But if we can assume Foles' gesture was meant to penetrate the roof and travel up to heaven, then you too may find it a bit odd, if touching. Most people, as the poet Czeslaw Milosz has said, are ashamed to ask themselves a question about the implication of such a gesture.

"They have experienced the collapse of hierarchical space," he writes, "and when they fold their hands and lift up their eyes, 'up' no longer exists. Let no one say that religion can manage without such primitive directions to orient people."



Modern science has brought this about. And together with its models of reality, it has given us its technological child: nuclear weapons. So now we live haunted by the shadowy thought that human beings, having assumed God's mantle, can bring this world to an end in a flash. As William Butler Yeats said in another context:

"All changed; changed utterly."

But while we live in these end-times, in a new symbolic universe, our sense of spiritual power to stop the nuclear madness has been sapped by our refusal to venture deep into the interior of this enigma and change our minds and spirits enough to change the world. We seem stuck riding our bikes when we need to stop the world we think we know and experiment with truth at the deepest level. We need a revolutionary spiritual transformation to give us faith and courage to counter the nihilists who wage endless wars for the American empire and threaten nuclear destruction at every turn. Where can we find this inconceivable spiritual energy?

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I was thinking of this not long ago when something very strange happened to me. Six days previously I had written an article subtitled, "In Light and Shadows." On this particular morning I was sitting at the kitchen table contemplating that piece of writing and whether or not readers had grasped what I was trying to say by linking three very short stories that undulated like the flow of consciousness in waves of light and darkness. The phone rang, and as I answered I stood up and looked out the window at a flaming red bush, it being the height of fall's display of colors. I heard my wife sobbing on the other end. "My mother's dying," she cried. "Oh no," I replied, as I had an immediate flashback to my own mother dying five years earlier, and an inexplicably dark foreboding feeling gripped me. For some reason I looked at my watch; it was 10:58 on Thursday morning. In that instant, as I raised my eyes back to the blazing bush, I saw a sliver of a crescent dark shadow creep into the inner corner of my right eye as I listened to my wife tell me through her tears how her mother, who shared the name Rita with my mother, had turned a corner toward her death. When she was done, I told her something strange had happened to my eye.

I had suffered a detached retina.

While I was fortunate to have excellent doctors for whom I'm very grateful, they were not very interested in my story of when the detachment occurred. Their job, as they rightly saw

it, was to repair my eye and the rest was speculation since they operate within a materialistic paradigm. But as I recuperated, lying face down with my eyes closed for a few weeks, I had a lot of time to speculate (Latin, *specere*, to look at, view; pursuit of the truth by means of thinking).

As I lay there hour after hour, day after day, eyes closed, I found that what began as thinking turned into contemplation. I had come to a dark place. I had been stopped in my tracks. The world I took for granted, my routine, my habitual way of seeing, my known world was stopped, and while shocked, I realized that I was given the gift of a revelatory experience if only I would accept it. With my eyes down and closed, I had entered the temple of contemplation where images rose to my inner eye, and if I paid enough attention, they would lead me to a place of insight.

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As a sociologist, I teach my students that sociology is the study of our *social* habits of thought, speech, and action. These habits or routines, which often become crystalized into myths and institutions, imprison us in ways we are loath to admit. Our collective mental habits are so powerful because they lie far deeper than mere thought can reach, and therefore to break them is as difficult as learning how not to ride a bicycle after years of knowing how. Where does one begin?

George Orwell once observed that

“we have sunk to a depth at which re-statement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men.”

Today restating the obvious doesn't seem to make much difference. At the level of the habits of group think and political and cultural propaganda, many of us have been trying to do that to little avail as the lies and deceptions of the U.S. power elites seem to win the day, day after day. It is blatantly obvious that these people lie endlessly in their pursuit of an empire built of sand saturated with the blood of innocent victims at home and abroad. Yet despite the obvious, and despite it being pointed out again and again, vast numbers of otherwise intelligent people continue to imbibe the myth that the “other side” (now the Democrats) will change the nihilistic trajectory of an evil capitalistic system leading to nuclear annihilation. The naiveté is frightening as these people calmly ride their bicycles down the primrose path of death denial.

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As I lay contemplating the images that crossed my inner eye, I saw that we wear our social mental habits like shrouds that conceal the waking dead those habits have rendered us, sleepwalking prisoners marching toward oblivion. But why? Sure, the political propagandists are skilled at their work, having learned from and greatly superseded their mentor, Edward Bernays, in the tricks of the trade. And the technology has made their job much easier, and the CIA and other intelligence services have their people throughout the mass media. Yet something was missing in this explanation, a deeper explanation. It was then I again realized that there are different paradigms or experiences of reality operating in the world. The prevailing one today sees only a world of things, a material world that includes people and animals, a billiard ball world where surfaces without centers careen

around in physical cause-and-effect determined movements. In this world the story of how my retina became detached is perhaps somewhat weirdly interesting but “just coincidental.” I suspected that my good doctors, if we met for a drink, would still hold firm to their habitual paradigms of physical cause and effect. They would have a very difficult time trying not to ride their bikes.

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Another way of seeing is provided by Owen Barfield, English philosopher and poet, one of the most neglected and original thinkers of the twentieth century, who countered the superficiality of our materialistic collective thinking with these words:

The real world, the whole world, does not consist only of the things of which we are conscious; it consists also of the consciousness and subconsciousness that are correlative to them. They are the immaterial component of the world. But today the only immaterial element our mental habit acknowledges is our own little spark of self-consciousness. That is why we feel detached, isolated, cut off not only from the world as it really is, but also from those other little sparks of detached self-consciousness we acknowledge in our fellow human beings.

Imprisoned in our isolated minds and failing to grasp the interpenetration of mind and matter, thought and feeling, a sequence of forms and patterns changing into other forms, Barfield argues that we end up treating not only other people and ourselves as things, but all of nature, including animals, as inanimate objects to be used. The world becomes a place for necrophiliacs, not the home of living interconnected spirits. In such a world schizoid experience becomes commonplace. In such a crazy world, “what the self of each of us feels isolated *from*, cut off *from*, by its encapsulation in the naked physical reality presented to it by contemporary culture, is precisely its own existential source.” Such a physically encapsulated self is a false self without reality. It is no wonder that the use of drugs of every kind has risen exponentially, the earth despoiled, wars waged constantly, and nuclear weapons prepared to blow the planet to smithereens.

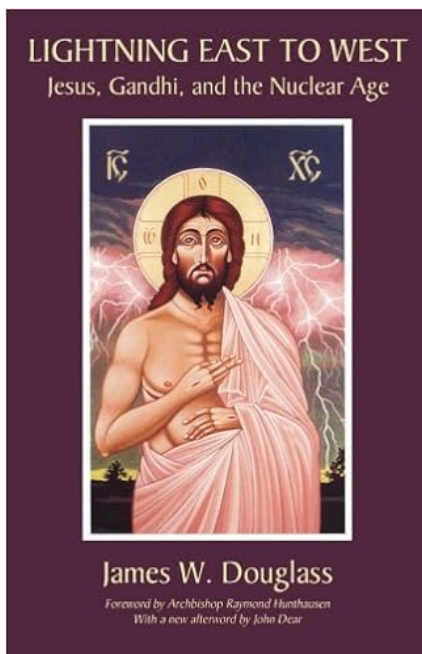
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I had been thrown off my bicycle and then my doctors got me up again. Of course I was so thankful for their medical expertise, but I needed to try to *not* ride the same old bike. How could I break the habit, and of what did the habit consist. I didn’t want to say that I had gone *not* too far in but just far enough to say I’d been there. In where? During the days when I strictly, almost obsessively, followed my doctor’s advice and, despite the great discomfort, lay immobile, face down, eyes closed, I found myself deep in a prison that seemed to open out into a place of fear and freedom simultaneously. Although I wasn’t looking around and needed help with simple things, which my wife so kindly provided me, I experienced a weird sense of concentrated power from within the terrible vulnerability I felt. I am trying not to exaggerate, but this sense of power in vulnerability was very real. I had no interest in listening to the two books on tape I had; Tolstoy and James Baldwin seemed like intruders. They would distort the vision of what I was sensing. I think at its heart was a core of emptiness and powerlessness, which in the oddest of ways made me feel very powerful, as though all my teaching and writing and efforts to help others and make the world a better place and give advice and try to change people were useless and arrogant, but that their uselessness was their usefulness, and in accepting that I was embracing an essential truth.

Earlier in my life I had numerous very profound experiences with synchronicity that had convinced me that our consensual reality conceals a level of truth rarely felt because of the power of habit. But these experiences had been all positive and had left me feeling amazed but powerful. One even involved the power of a look I gave another. The power of my eyes. This latest one was different since it frightened me and made me vulnerable. Telling you all this makes me feel doubly vulnerable, but now I don't care. I now know why I have long wanted to make a word my own but never could. The word is *insouciant*. Somehow it has become me more since this latest experience.

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We are ruled by people who think they have everything under their control, including the nuclear weapons that are the ultimate expression of the hubris emanating from Einstein's equation of $E = mc^2$, the unimaginable amount of energy contained in a particle of matter. Those who brandish nuclear weapons operate within a consensual reality that is a form of madness, and these madmen will incinerate us all unless they are opposed by a force equal to that they brandish. How can we stop them?



In his extraordinary book, *Lightning East to West, Jesus, Gandhi, and the Nuclear Age*, James. W. Douglass suggests that there is such a force and a way to stop this holocaust. It lies within you and me. He says:

Is there a spiritual reality, inconceivable to us today, which corresponds in history to the physical reality which Einstein discovered and which led to the atomic bomb? Einstein discovered a law of physical change : the way to convert a single particle of matter into enormous physical energy. Might there not also be, as Gandhi suggested, an equally incredible and undiscovered law of spiritual change, whereby a single person or small community of persons could be converted into an enormous spiritual energy capable of transforming a society and a world? I believe that there is , that there must be, a spiritual reality corresponding to $E = mc^2$ because, from the standpoint of creative harmony, the universe is incomplete without it, and because, from the standpoint of moral freedom, humankind is sentenced to extinction without it.

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I believe it too. It arises in the hearts and minds of those totally committed to the truth no matter where it leads, and the passion to suffer it, even when it makes them look foolish.

"A man needs a little madness, or else....he never dares cut the rope and be free," Zorba tells the boss in Nikos Kazantzakis's Zorba the Greek.

So let's try learning not to ride our bicycles so we can save ourselves and the world.

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