

# Manifestos

“My life has been the poem I would have writ,  
But I could not both live and utter it.”

—Henry David Thoreau

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## THE HERESY

“Fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the seas, the birds of the air and every living thing that moves upon the earth.”

—Genesis 1:28

The believer sees the heresy as the human attempt “to be like God,” just as the serpent told Eve. We are given dominion over the world created by God. God has placed all things under our feet, all sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the seas. And though we be crowned with glory and honor, we are still a little less than God.

But is not the real heresy to believe that God is in control? When we look around at the world as it now is, with all its war, poverty, environmental degradation, and suffering, it is pretty clear that we’re the ones who have messed it up and that God isn’t doing anything to stop us. Or to make the world better.

So, if the world is to become a better place, it up to us, not God. The Asian religions (and evolutionists) see humans not as living *in* nature but as being *a part* of nature—a small but integral piece of the whole. There is nothing outside the universe to govern it. The universe governs itself. God as well is not a being who dwells outside of us, but a power that dwells within us. The point of intersection between God and the world is the incarnate flesh–spirit, which is what each of us already is. The only difference is whether we realize this or still think of ourselves as separate from God.

God saw everything he had made and declared it “good.” In fact the world is indifferent. There is neither good nor evil in the universe itself. Such distinctions merely reflect our own evaluations from our own point of view. The wonder is not why there is much that we regard as evil in the world, but why there is also so much that we regard as good. To declare the world “good” means we do not hope to go to a perfect heaven after we die, but are content to live in the world just as it is with all its imperfections, not expecting any outside help to fix it, but to realize our own divinity and to take full responsibility ourselves for what the world becomes.

Massillon, Ohio  
Summer, 1974

## EXPERIENTIALISM (1): A MYSTICAL ANALYSIS

What can be said? I really don’t want to say anything at all. I wish that somehow the experiences I have had could be miraculously translated into your own experiences. But this is not possible. You cannot hear me tell of myself; you must experience for yourself. Words are inadequate vehicles. They will never take you where you want

to go. We cannot be sure we will reach the same destination unless we travel together. And neither of us, it seems, is particularly interested in staying home.

I want to say that the poet has power. But I can't really believe this, even though his angel wings remain unclipped. Poets always have an ulterior motive. Indeed, they will tell you where they have been and where they are going. But they are not literalists. What they mean does not depend on what they say but on how you interpret it. The poet does not bid you to join him on the journey but to strike a path of your own. Until then there is nothing more to be said.

Johnson City, Tennessee  
Spring, 1976

### THE PROCESS

The process is a painful one of spiritual disintegration, dissolution, and decadence. The opening incantations of maturity, despite their sense of order and harmony, foreshadow the collapse of spiritual unity which follows. The problem is, in truth, not a problem of existence, but rather a problem of how existence has been previously defined. One cannot simply do away with his mistaken beliefs unless he has first fought against them, conquered, and prevailed.

A person is born, then born again. Spiritual idealism is attained. Suddenly life itself becomes not something that is lived but a vacuous concept. Life of the truly living is vicariously denied, swallowed up by the demands of transcendence. Existence has been sacrificed on the altar of essence. Exchanged by religion for glimpse at its semblance, life among the shadows becomes tentative and uncertain, inferior to the pure world of spirit.

Religion is therefore a retrogression back to the procrustean womb. One must now be *thrice*-born out of one's newly acquired prenatal state—the past forgotten, an amnesia of the waking. The waters of birth must now become the waters of Lethe. Struggling against the established order, however, one cannot easily forget. The renegade sees himself as a new martyr, a Judas, unable to define himself except in terms of his rebellion against an order which he has, ironically, already delegitimized.

He enjoys his suffering, pitifully watching his reflection weep in a mirror, chained like Prometheus to the rock of his own messianic delusions. But this image must also be shattered—broken like the thin, translucent, illusionary membrane which binds him forever to the womb until it is ruptured.

Transcendence still reigns. The spell unbroken, despair has not yet come. Instead, the exile celebrates his *decision* to re-enter life, nontranscendence. Peering from the portal, nature becomes renewed, pulsing with Dionysian fervor. He sees the world with primitive eyes. Sexuality is linked once again to primeval religion. Love, once

open, tender, and joyful, becomes possessive, malicious, and violent. He has forebodings of the end, precognitions and presentiments of the coming insanity.

Haunted by the loss of even his right to choose his own martyrdom, life in terms of religion loses its final meaning. The tinkling of windbells, the silent music of the spheres, canticles to the sinking sun have been replaced by shuffling feet, haunted cathedral bells, the cacophony of clarions and trumpets. The nimbus of the setting sun gives way to solitary lamplight hovering above patches of concrete. The stumble. The fall. The expulsion from the garden.

It is now that the outcast suffers his last temptation. Lacking any point of reference, a sun around which his life might permanently revolve, he longs for the security of the past. His first attempts at escape had been impulsive, his sense of freedom liberating, but now that his rebellion has grown cold, he is stricken with an incurable depression. He beholds no wonder. He is faced with the choice of either feigned belief and acceptance or explicit apostasy and damnation.

But neither faith nor doubt need to be disputed. Striving, born of idealism, produces only contrived states of existence. The desire to dominate nature, others, or even oneself—can only end in total disillusionment. Had not his initial commitment to a force outside himself attempted to satisfy these various desires. Pursued to its end, the quest for security can only result its exact opposite: insecurity, desolation, and devastation, both personal and cosmic. Is this not humankind's last attempt at self-martyrdom—under the guise of a savior who has become the world's destroyer?

The apocalypse is not the end, however. It merely clears the ground for new beginnings in a simplified world. Isolated whimpers in solitude crescendo into one mighty cry of defiance.

Elizabethton, Tennessee  
Good Friday, 1979

#### EXPERIENTIALISM (2): A SONNET

*Imitation I:* Nature, humanity, poetry: The first has expired by the hands of the second.  
The second has overtasted the fruits of the third. The third is dead.

*Imitation II:* Anthropocentric deities and platonic ideas: the imagination intoxicated by  
its own fantasies and delusion. We must return to our caves.

*Representation:* Objectivity is a misnomer for a spider's silk. The web may ensnare us.

*Symbolism:* Once upon a time Beelzebub was a hungry fly on rotting meat—nothing  
more, yet nothing less.

*Abstraction:* “One can love one’s neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it’s almost impossible.” Love is only a morpheme made in hollow mouths, not to be found until it is abandoned by the tongue which utters it.

*Denotation:* The logos which crystallizes forever the fleeting moment of existence. All words are blasphemous. Experience is a fire and a river. Possibilities are limited only when the word becomes incarnate.

*Connotation:* Meaning never lurks between the inky lines but rather in the empty spaces outside them, not in what is said but in what cannot be said. Meaning is void, an unholy nirvana, four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence or more.

*Imposition:* Art is the imposition of form upon nature. Wilderness is nature that has not yet been imposed upon.

*Tyranny:* “Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” which is precisely why they must be overthrown in the name of freedom and anarchy. “Until poets become kings or kings become poets” is nothing but propaganda.

*Revolt:* The journalist records what is and is therefore the ablest metaphysician. The poet imagines what might be and is therefore the ablest ethician. The insurgent hides in secret catacombs and is therefore unknown to anyone. He asks without ceremony, “Here am I. Where are you?”

*Iconoclasm:* “The poets shall be our prophets and poetry our scriptures.” Only poets believe this provincialism. It is only when all idols have been smashed and the scriptures burned that silence may be heard. The only poet who speaks truly is one who no longer speaks.

*Academicism:* Poetry died when it left the freezing garrets for the halls of academia where the heart no longer pulses.

*Esotericism:* Fish swim in the deep ocean. But we are not fish. We easily drown. There is no resurrection from the waters.

*Reality:* The world I live in is not the one that exists but the one I imagine. I do not write poems. I live in them. Poetry is not language but experience. My life is the poem I write about myself, a work of art that I myself create.

Chicago, Illinois  
Autumn, 1980

## PLUM BLOSSOMS

The blossoms have been out for a day or so now. I don't even know what kind they are. Plum blossoms I think. I've never paid much attention to such things. I have only noted their beauty: white-edged with barely perceptible tints of pink, and wine-dark centers. It doesn't really matter much if we know their names or not.

A few have already fallen. In a couple of days there won't be any left.

Judged by eternity, they are here but a moment. And then they disappear. The delicate petals cover the ground like snow, and melt like snow, and are reabsorbed back into the dark brown earth like snow. But for this one moment they *are*; they *exist*. Is their beauty any less, even knowing they will fall away so soon after blooming?

When my son was three months old, I baptized him. It was raining that night. I reached my hand out the window. One, two, three times I touched raindrops to his head.

Why did I do it? Old rituals die hard. But the meaning had changed. The water not a symbol of cleansing, of holiness aspired to, but of the holiness he already possessed. Despite the fear of bringing a child into a world of miseries, the rite was a way of saying: welcome.

What if my son had died before I'd had a chance to tell him that? What if instead of the seventy or so years most of us are given to look around this earth, my son had only been given seventy seconds? Would his life have been meaningless for having been so short?

Yet even if he were to have died the moment just after birth, he still would have had this one moment. Life would have asserted itself. Of course, of course, of course, it would be better to live a long and full life, to have a chance to write the story of oneself in the pages of time, with a proper beginning, middle, and end. Nonetheless, should we not be grateful to have lived one moment than to never have lived at all? Each moment that we have is what matters most. Matsuo Basho (in a free, non-literal translation):

やがて死ぬけしきは見えず蟬の声  
*yagate shinu keshiki wa miezu semi no koe*

The cicada sings and sings  
 not knowing  
 that tomorrow it dies

It's a little like being in love but separated from your lover. She writes you that she'll be passing your town tomorrow on a non-stop train to some distant city. She won't be able to get off and talk to you, but as the train barrels past the station she will look out the window and wave. Will you go to see her? It will only be for a second and only for a wave, but you may never see her again. Forever.

A person with a shriveled sense of love will stay home. Why even bother? He will only be able to see his lover for one instant; it would only make him feel his loneliness more deeply.

The person whose love is selfless, who expects nothing in return, would go. Nothing could keep him away. And for that one moment he would smile. Only when the train has passed would he cry his bitter tears. He has earned them. The whimpering man who stayed home has not.

Marcus Aurelius: “Despise not death, but welcome it, for Nature wills it like all else.” When someone we love dies, of course we are sad. How else could we feel? But should we not be glad that out of all the possible arrangements in an endless universe floating through endless time, we each have had this one moment? A life may only be one single flickering spark, but it is fire nonetheless, a flash of that the same light which illumines us all. This is the way of the world.

For this one moment I am. For this one moment I can see the beauty of the plum blossoms. For this one moment I can hold you in my arms. For this one moment I can experience all that I am able to experience. For this one moment I can reach out my hands to the world.

We may not know “why” but is it not better for there to be something rather than nothing? Isn’t the one moment the plum blossoms bloom better than a plum tree that has not even been planted? If you have faith, you must be able to see everything in the world as you do a plum blossom. You may be sorrowful at its passing, but you will never regret that it boomed. You will affirm life even when the grass withers, the flower fades, the sparrow falls, the snow melts, the stars disappear, the infant dies. You will affirm all that is, irrespective of whether it brings you joy or sorrow.

What else is life if not this? What else is the holy?

Hino, Japan  
March, 1982

#### THESES OF A FREE SPIRIT

1. *Spiritual goals*: There are no *a priori* spiritual goals. It is not the purpose of religion to establish a set of such goals, nor to provide spiritual models for devotees to follow. The only authentic spiritual goals are those that individuals establish for themselves or collectively with each other. If no such goals are established, there is no need for religion. Just as a person who is not sick has no need of a physician.

2. *Spiritual paths*: Because there are no *a priori* spiritual goals, neither can there be an *a priori* spiritual path which will lead whoever takes it to a state of spiritual fulfillment (enlightenment, salvation, etc.). Buddha’s “Be a lamp unto your own path” trumps

Christ's "Follow me." We are not each climbing the same mountain and approaching the same summit on different paths. We are each climbing different mountains, the ones that we ourselves have chosen to climb. We are continually in the process of making the path that we travel on.

3. *Spiritual truth*: Spiritual truth is not something outside of ourselves. It is something within us, something we *are* ("I *am* the way, the truth, and the life"). There is no need to search for it, because it is already present. The divine is not something to be found only on mountaintops or in the inner sanctums of temples and cathedrals. It is what there is immediately around us. No ultimate distinction can be made between the sacred and the profane, between samsara and nirvana. There is no mirror to be wiped clean; the dust cannot gather. The truth we understand cannot be communicated; the truth we each experience cannot be shared.

4. *Spiritual creeds*: Creeds are valid only if they express an individual's spiritual experience. They cannot be imposed. If we put ourselves in a spiritual box we are unable to experience what is outside the box, and thus deny the infinite. The best creeds are those which remain unwritten and unbelieved in. Iconoclasm insists that the mystery must remain as it is: a mystery, not something that can be defined in words. We must not bow down before any idol, particularly the idols of religion and spirituality. To realize the nameless I-am-that-which-I-am, we must be willing to burn the scriptures, to desecrate temples, to slay the Buddha, to step on our crosses.

5. *Spiritual practice*: There are no prescribable techniques which will inevitably bring us into contact with our own spiritual truth. Satori and spiritual awakening can come in a flash and require no special preparation. Various disciplines, such as prayer and contemplation, may have their value, but so may the experiences of seeing a sunrise or smelling a flower. The most meaningful rituals are those we create for ourselves.

6. *Spiritual authority*: The purpose of religion is not to point to itself but to the fullness of life that it is possible for us to live. Do not bow down before the gods, but find the god within you. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for God works not from above but in you.

7. *Spiritual counselors*: Spiritual guides cannot establish spiritual goals or paths for others. Each person must determine these for themselves. Religious experience is purely individual. My hunger is not satisfied by what another person has eaten. The function of a spiritual counselor is not to give them the truth but to draw out the truth already inside them. Because this truth is always accessible to the individual, it can in principle be discovered entirely on one's own, with no help from a spiritual guide. Ultimately there can be no intermediary between a person and his or her own truth, and hence no ultimate need for either priests or masters.



8. *Spiritual communities:* Since there is no intermediary between individuals and their spiritual truths, any spiritual community is *ipso facto* a priesthood of individual believers. There can be no institutional hierarchy in a spiritual community if all are seekers and none possess the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. No one is infallible. Spiritual growth is impossible for those who refuse to acknowledge their own fallibility. No ultimate distinctions can be made between those who are “inside” and “outside” of a spiritual community nor between the orthodox and the heretical within a community. We are all brothers and sisters who come together to learn from and share our truths with each other.

9. *Spiritual traditions:* The great historic religious traditions provide a record of some of the spiritual possibilities that have been explored in the past. For a tradition to speak to the present, however, it must be constantly in the process of reinventing itself. Traditions are counterproductive when they become fossilized, in any way impede the individual quest, or locate spiritual truth in something outside of the individual which is believed to be worthy of devotion and worship (God, Savior, Bodhisattva, etc.). Since it is impossible for one tradition to encompass the whole of spiritual wisdom, it is not necessary to limit oneself to the strictures of a single tradition. While something valuable can be learned from every tradition, this does not imply eclecticism. Discernment is needed to distinguish what is truly valuable in a tradition from what is manifest nonsense. No progress can be made unless individuals are given the freedom step outside of their traditions and create entirely new ones (exactly what Jesus and the Buddha did). Any tradition which denies the individual the right to spiritual autonomy should be abandoned.

10. *Spiritual perfection:* Spiritual perfection does not consist in following the dictates of a religious tradition nor in emulating the model provided by a presumed religious figure. We are already Buddhas and messiahs (anointed ones). A spark of the divine is in each of us. In all that we do and experience, we must let the holy seed inside us grow and bear fruit. Perfection comes not by keeping the tree pruned and manicured, but by letting it grow free and wild, so that we might become what we already are.

*Conclusion:* Pronouncements such as these may be discarded at will since they have absolutely nothing to do with the actual *content* of religious experience, which is ineffable, just as the sun is neither true nor false but simply *is*. There can be no catholic truths which are definitive for all people, at all times, and in all places, only particular truths we each find at particular times and in particular places.

Takao, Japan  
October 31, 1985

TO SAY WHAT CANNOT BE SAID

To say what cannot be said  
 To hear what cannot be heard  
 To see what cannot be seen  
 To touch what cannot be touched  
 To smell what cannot be smelled  
 To taste what cannot be tasted  
 To sense what cannot be sensed  
 To feel what cannot be felt  
 To experience what cannot be experienced  
 To know what cannot be known  
 To understand what cannot be understood  
 To think what cannot be thought  
 To speak what cannot be spoken  
 To write what cannot be written  
 To express what cannot be expressed  
 To paint what cannot be painted  
 To sculpt what cannot be sculpted  
 To sing what cannot be sung  
 To dance what cannot be danced  
 To dream what cannot be dreamed  
 To give what cannot be given  
 To take what cannot be taken  
 To do what cannot be done  
 To act without taking action  
 To live when there is no life  
 To die when there is no death  
 To be where there is no being  
 To not be where there is being  
 To go where one cannot go  
 To find what cannot be found  
 To lose what cannot be lost  
 To love what cannot be loved  
 To hate what cannot be hated  
 To imprison what cannot be imprisoned  
 To kill what cannot be killed  
 To forgive what cannot be forgiven  
 To forget what cannot be forgotten  
 Whereof we cannot speak, we must remain silent  
 I have nothing to say and I am saying it

## Annotations

The epigraph is from Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* in *Walden and Other Writings*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 422.

### EXPERIENTIALISM (2): A SONNET

The quote in *Abstraction* is from Fyodor Dostoyevsky, “Rebellion” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957 [1880]), p. 219. The quote in *Tyranny* is from Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry” in *English Romantic Writers*, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1967 [1821]), p. 1087.

### PLUM BLOSSOMS

The original haiku by Matsuo Basho was translated by Richard Evanoff.

### TO SAY WHAT CANNOT BE SAID

References: Mikhail Bakunin, Ludwig van Beethoven, John Cage, Chuang Tzu, Cratylus, Jacques Derrida, Marcel Duchamp, Meister Eckhart, Gautama Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, Gorgias, Stephen Hawking, Hermann Hesse, Edmund Hillary, Homer, William James, Jesus, John Paul II, Franz Kafka, Helen Keller, Martin Luther King Jr., Lao Tzu, Friedrich Nietzsche, Kitaro Nishida, Stéphane Mallarme, Nelson Mandela, Vaslav Nijinsky, Edgar Allan Poe, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Robert Rauschenberg, Arthur Rimbaud, J. D. Salinger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simon & Garfunkel, Frank Sinatra, D. T. Suzuki, Ted Williams, Ludwig Wittgenstein.