

A Place Called Freedom

When theology falls silent, when politics is threatened

John C. Raines



Is a prideful word. It's full of boldness over against the internal slumbering of the rest of our planet's creatures. That's because they carry their world with them, like a snail and its shell, while man emerges out of an information gap. Other animals are directed by an instinctual encoding, while we must tell ourselves what we need to know in order to survive. Indeed, we must persuade ourselves to listen. We lack an internal conviction of reality, automatic animal persuasion. As anthropologist Ernest Becker says, "man became man *in a total celebration of himself.*"

We take our rise as a kind of rebel. We hold ourselves back from automatic reactivity, refuse the world's immediacy. Ego signals a new kind of freedom. It permits the organism to wait and delay its response. It "creates" time by giving the external flow of events a fixed point of *self-reference*. This exposes us, this "I" that sticks out into an otherwise slumbering eternity of undisturbed stimulus/response.

Ego is a kind of bold and embarrassed privacy, nourishing itself upon a precarious celebration of its right to be this way. Why precarious? Because we arrive at this internal boldness by way of the dialectic of selfhood and society. As children we become aware of ourselves first as "me" and only later as "I." We can look back upon, and take note of, ourselves only because we have first been looked upon by others. We come to selfhood *from outside in*. We

begin, then, as a looking-glass self, a being absorbed upon its performance before others.

Every society devises elaborate rituals to regulate this reciprocal interchange between selves. It is in this way that we can approach each other with something less than total astonishment. Indeed, we label severe incapacity in proper social performance "mental illness." A maniac, to give one example, is one who, after watching the conviviality of a well-performed scene of one person offering another a cigarette, falls all over himself showering a stranger with dozens of cigarettes, cigars and assorted broad grins. We confine such persons to asylums, which are houses designed to impel persons to perform *our play* "to act as expected."

We are, then, creatures who have both "insides" and an "outside." In this polarity, sustaining and strengthening inner space is crucial. For it is in such internal privacy that we protect ourselves from persistent exposure and so become more our own. It is in this inner reserve that we learn to orchestrate our own disclosure, self-dramatize our lives, and so begin to move *from inside out*. Still, all this is not easy. We are quickly humiliated. Many seek to use our insides against us, in order to bend us to their purpose.

One of the places we are most exposed to this undermining is where we are most consistently visible, and in that sense available to others: namely, our body. The problem, as philosopher Jean Paul Sartre saw, is that we both *are*

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bodies and *have* bodies. That we are bodies is evident from the fact that we are somewhere-creatures, not everywhere-beings. We are locatable, caught and held fast by our bodies. Said directly, it is the place we die. But even at the same moment we also *have* bodies. We watch ourselves being watched, make judgments about how we are seen and touched. We are exposed to the other's eyes, condemned to watch those watching us. That's why Sartre found "body" such a burden. "I keep getting stolen from myself by the other's eyes!" he exclaimed.

This is one of commercial advertising's most beloved secrets. Knowing little of modesty, it is adept at using our outside to domesticate us to its market interests. Witness a recent advertisement for *Glamour* magazine under the title "New Body Language." Already the irony appears, since it is woman's traditional enslavement to be forced to "speak" with her body. It's supposedly what she has mostly to say. The ad proclaims:

New Body Language — Glamour defines it. Tells a new generation of free-thinking young women how it's communicated. In clothes and in posture. In what they wear and what they bare. The magazine records the Breakaway Girl's total acceptance of her body and sex. Neither flaunting it nor hiding it. It previews the new liberation of mind, body and fashion that will shape the decade of the Seventies.

This is accompanied by a full-page picture of a young woman wearing jeans, hands in pockets, posture relaxed . . . confident . . . at ease, her sweater cut to reveal a bold and delicious navel. The face is directly forward, an expression of both availability and indifference, of accomplished worldliness and whimsy . . . a kind of invulnerability.

The first thing to note is that the ad is an *obvious lie*. It says it's about free-thinking young women and their liberation. But if women became truly free-thinking, they would also become unmanipulable by the fashion-makers, and *Glamour* and its many companions would go out of business. No, the advertisement is about *selling*, not liberation. It's about using a woman's outsides to manipulate and manage her insides: her view of herself, her sense of personal worth, her beauty for security . . . and thus what she is urged to buy.

The place of attack is the body—its irreducible shyness, its persistent exposure before the assessing eyes of others. The implied promise is body competence ("total acceptance of her body and sex"), an "I" freed to enjoy its executive powers. But the psychodynamics of the ad depend upon, *in fact deepen*, precisely the opposite: a woman's caughtness in the open-ended vulnerability of her body-presentation. It's a picture not of sexual liberation but of the commercial exploitation of our culturally

induced sex roles. The result is the trivialization of our inner space. *We learn our world as commercial objects rather than as personal subjects*. It's a remarkably honest statement of how our society wants us to be.

In the task of protecting the "I" against such cultural expropriation, we need to find resources of basic self-esteem. For it is in the seclusion of internal self-enjoyment that we unfold distances of meaning between ourselves and the external marketplace, begin to move *from inside out*, and so resist easy defeat.

Psychiatrist Rollo May commented ironically upon the fact that magazines like *Playboy* and *Glamour* have succeeded only in transferring the fig leaf from the human genitals to the human face. This modern "facelessness," the loss of intensity and well-focused transaction with life, has for more than a decade now puzzled social critics. Kenneth Keniston thinks it has to do with a basic loss of nerve. In *The Uncommitted* he argues that what is needed is "the courage to be *for* something despite the perishability and transience of all human endeavors." This makes a nice point. Self-esteem is in part the courage to be, in spite of the fleetingness and contingency of reality. It is the assertion of a bold, if necessarily precarious, *belonging*—that we are meant here this way.

There are those who disagree. They argue that such boldness is our species' fundamental fault, our Sin. In his *Institutes* Calvin argues that

We are not our own. In so far as we can, let us therefore forget ourselves and all that is ours Let this therefore be the first step, that a man depart from himself in order that he may apply the whole force of his ability in the service of the Lord.

Man is to expunge the boldness of his inner space. The world is not open to his staging. It is, instead, a place divinely staged to which man is to be broken and conformed.

But the human face, which cannot see itself reflected in its worldly activity, remains profoundly veiled from its own reality. It thinks of its works as not its own even as it does them. And that is dangerous. For from the beginning it has been our species' peculiar task to survive only by becoming aware of our activities as ours, and so freeing ourselves from enthrallment to the past. It is what allowed homo sapiens to emerge quite suddenly out of the winnowing of an Ice Age, which crushed so many other species more securely encrusted within their instinctual encodings. We arose as a freedom event, self-directing.

Ironically, the self-humiliation encouraged by people like Calvin is in fact a gigantic but misplaced attempt at self-control—a suspicious and parsimonious fear that our still untamed insides might burst forth in a floodtide of anarchy and shame. But it is an attempt at control which doesn't work. For those who find nothing of joy and curiosity inside themselves are constantly driven to "place" themselves in something outside. And this leads to a fetishizing of life: seeking to lose oneself—in the numinous, in a political cause, in personal therapy or, more popularly these days, in one's possessions. The inability to "show one's face," to play the world, results in an attempt to found oneself *from outside in*. It's an astonishing discovery—that the fundamental movement of self-estimate in both *Glamour* and in much of Eastern and Western religion is the same: to receive oneself as one who is sovereignly watched.

The fetishist is unable to believe in his competence to fill the world with his own creative meanings, and so seeks safety in surrender, in release from belonging to himself. He is afraid of life, where he sees a kind of dying going on all the time. We can find an example of this in the recent rise of a fetish of physical well-being.

What does this explosion of health spas, weight watchers, cholesterol counters, health foods, jogging in the morning and athletics at noon all mean? We might conclude it shows but a proper self-esteem, the attempt to nurture one's vital powers and so prolong personal effectiveness. But examined more closely, the opposite seems more likely the case: *health for health's sake in a world bereft of public meanings that might win us to self-abandon and exhaustion*. If at heart we are creatures of a unique intensity and alertness, seeking to be drawn mightily into dramas laden with significance, then preoccupation with physical health represents a profound enervation. It is a kind of lowest common denominator for a culture which has lost faith in values that transcend a person's narrow well-being.

Ours is a time, it seems, when physicians and turn-keys gain enormously in authority because they preside over our bodies. The nineteenth-century social critic Max Stirner (in his *The Ego and Its Own*) gave powerful voice to this insight.

When one is anxious only to *live*, he easily, in this solicitude, forgets the *enjoyment* of life. If his only concern is for life, and he thinks "if only I have my dear life," he does not apply his full strength to using, i.e., enjoying, life. But how does one use life? In using it up, like the candle, which one uses in burning it up. One uses life, and consequently himself, the living one, in *consuming* it and himself. Enjoyment of life is using life up.

Here is an exhilarating sense of exhausting oneself by weaving one's inner self lavishly into the external world. In order that man be fully alive, he must practice not only a biological but a *species being*, the expressive art of creatively impressing his meanings upon external reality. It's the only way we have of really saying "yes" to ourselves. And compared to it the privatized, simply interpersonal self-affirmation of much of popular psychology remains a kind of timid apology.

This modern timidity contrasts sharply with the idea of man's essential "publicness" that one finds in classical theory as well as in both early Liberal and Marxist theory. Man, they held, is a *homo politicus*, a being who stages his world. But the self-confidence required for such active political engagement can no longer be taken for granted.

The attack upon modern man's sense of personal validity is most clearly seen in the increasing difficulty he has in marshaling the spirit to live exposed before the powers of history. Dropping out into privatized consolations is more and more popular. Political philosopher Hannah Arendt reflects (in *The Human Condition*) upon the reason for this. Political engagement teaches us that

he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes "guilty" of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and that its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act.

This exposure to contingency—to the power that meets our power and deflects us from the simplicity of intended goals—can be profoundly debilitating. Why? Because we are creatures who remain haunted by a need for conviction, for confidence concerning our basic competence for life. We must ourselves fuel and energize our world, and cannot depend upon an automatic instinctual enlivening. Without this we lose interest in public life, deaden our attentiveness to wider reality, and let our focus drift.

One of religion's traditional enterprises has been to bridge this gap between contingency and conviction, and so supply society with a sense of steadiness and significance. The idea of Providence, for example, performed this function in Christianity. It supplied the bridge between what seems to be going on and what we need to feel about the relationship between human intentions and historical consequences in order to remain active shapers of our circumstances. Man does not live by

ambiguity. Life at its everyday level is both more serious and more unself-conscious than the delicately balanced psychic poise of the ironic spectator. With its doctrine of Divine Foreordination, Christianity recognized this. It sought to shepherd men's souls into serious moral effort despite bewilderment from the recognition that "the rain falls equally upon the just and the unjust." The moral obscurity of history, it asserted, is undergirded by a hidden, yet determinative, Providential Will which is wholly good. This doctrine vastly strengthened man's conviction for his public task and calling. In the name of humility it gave birth to a boldness that shaped a whole civilization.

Yet all this depends fundamentally upon a firm floor of powerful meaning lying just beneath the shifting sands of history. It required, as it were, the "intimate attention" of a corrective divine dimension. And in an age that suffers (as I shall argue) from a loss of horizons, it is precisely this sense of ultimate groundedness that gives way. In such an age, religion's secular equivalents fall into a parallel inarticulateness.

Marxism, for example, began as a vigorous reclamation of man to himself, to his species' task of actively molding his surroundings. It was, it seemed, a proclamation of man's right to stand his ground and be his own being. "The more of himself man attributes to God," Marx argued, "the less he has left in himself." Yet this proclamation maintained its confidence over against the debilitation of contingency only by constructing a "science of history," the ultimate effect of which was once again to remove man from his own agency. History holds together and makes sense, not in terms of personal (random) initiative, but as the unfolding of immanent dialectical laws. Freedom becomes "insight into necessity."

So long as people believed it, they marched as confidently to this drummer as Bunyan's pilgrim pursued his progress. But twentieth-century Marxists have largely given upon the idea that history unfolds with such logical exactitude. After all, the twentieth century just did not happen as predicted; so that socialist intellectuals not determinedly orthodox have begun to look elsewhere for their fundamental explanations.

Among the processes they have considered is one we Americans have been good at—pragmatic problem-solving. In essence it is the attempt to bracket off ultimate questions like the merely contingent connection between man's plans and their eventual arrival. It is a self-conscious scaling down of the dimensions of issues to those which prove in fact capable of solution. It led for a while to an enormously profitable specialization of inquiry unencumbered by man's background anxieties—a kind of all-American healthy-mindedness. But clearly this couldn't last.

Max Weber, who was one of the first to study this Western secularizing process, foresaw also its gathering crisis. In *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* he pointed out that

All research in the cultural sciences in an age of specialization, once it is oriented towards a given subject matter through particular settings of problems and has established its methodological principles, will consider the analysis of the data as an end in itself. It will discontinue assessing the value of the individual facts in terms of their relations to ultimate value-ideas. Indeed, it will lose its awareness of its ultimate rootedness in the value-ideas in general. And it is well that should be so. But there comes a moment when the atmosphere changes. The significance of the unreflectively utilized viewpoints becomes uncertain and the road is lost in the twilight. The light of the great cultural problems moves on. Then science too prepares to change its standpoint and its thought. It follows those stars which alone are able to give meaning and direction to its labors.

We have now reached that point. Holding our place in reality, resisting being overwhelmed, moving from inside out—all this implies the recognition of definite horizons of meaning. Never before have the dimensions of reality so explosively expanded for those attentive to such matters, or man seemed more precipitously diminished. Without some way to defend ourselves here, we face a fundamental undermining of the self-confidence necessary for active political engagement.

True, since Copernicus we have been persuaded that the earth is not the center of our solar system, that *we* move, not the sun. Still, in some curious way we did continue to believe, and depend upon the idea, that the earth held a central, perhaps *the* central, place in the total system of significance. As Diderot once observed:

If we banish man . . . the universe becomes quiet; silence and night take over. All is transformed into a vast solitude, where unobserved phenomena take place, in darkness and in deafness. It is the presence of man that renders natural existence interesting.

But this now seems premature—both in terms of (1) what we know about the nature of conscious existence, and (2) what we have come to learn about the awesome destruction/creativity at work in the abyss of space.

1. Freud was quick to admit the eroding effect upon human self-confidence of his view that much of our everyday activity has its foundations laid in

the irrational. Consciousness is not so much a point of pure transcendence as a harassed broker in the marketplace of libidinal push and the repressive shove Freud thought necessary for civilized routine to continue. Still, it is not only what we have learned about the irrational that has humbled our view of consciousness. It is what we have learned about the this-world, inter-human origins of man's self-reflective capacity. Consciousness, our sense of "I"-ness, is first of all a function of our species' social nature. Without human intercourse, it simply is not. And human intercourse is culturally relative.

We begin, it seems, as earth creatures, and rather recent arrivals at that, precariously emerging in our present form out of the catastrophes of an ice age, and of uncertain future and tenure. The net effect of recent discoveries in the science of man has been this homecoming of man to himself and, unanticipated, the loneliness of it all.

2. But it is not only the way of our arrival that has stunned us, it is the place we now know we have arrived at. We look up at the milky way, our galaxy, filled with billions of sun systems like our own. Or with the aid of optical or radio telescopes we look past our galaxy into the abyss of billions of other galaxies like this one, each with its billions of suns. Billions raised to the billionth power—it is no wonder that we feel some vertigo. The horizons are all disappearing.

We can watch stars being born in the gaseous regions of the Horsehead nebulae. We see awesome death, witnessing to the explosive terminus not just of stars but of whole galaxies of stars. We shudder before other experiments in being long since over, their suns burned out billions of years ago and collapsed, unable to say anything to us—except precisely that. Or we grow silent in turn before those future attempts at creation we can watch just now focusing and forming themselves out of the swirling hydrogen clouds. If "holding our ground," having a "sense of standing," is basic to sustaining inner space, then how are we to hold on these days, how not just get washed under by reality?

Modern man, alert to his situation, is in danger of becoming this kind of burned-over territory. Prior assurances, in their departure, have left him stunned—lacking basic conviction, wandering and self-indulgent. He has lost trust in the ultimate dignity of his inner space and its meaningful transactions with the external world. And the self which has no confidence in its own significance can have small respect for the awesome depths of others. Everything becomes "for sale," or humbly available to the diverse "treatments" of multiple experts.

I hold that this is a more accurate and important religious truth about our times than recent revivals of new and old pietisms: Jesus-followers, occultism, astrology, personal growth

movements and so on. The heart of the study of religion remains constructive theology. It is where religion gets most serious about itself. And theology is mostly silent these days. We have not yet discovered how to reorder the horizons. What we must learn, then, is to wait without foolishness. And this means that our need for confidence about our place in reality must look less to belief, which implies a certain establishment of perspective, than to the resources of courage.

The place to begin is with the self's irreducible identity with itself, with the knowledge that the self-recognition "I am I" cannot be converted into something more basic. Of course much *about* ourselves can be reduced to something behind it. That I have a certain visage, susceptibility to certain diseases, that I have certain deep-seated attitudes toward authority, or intimacy, or tidiness—all this can be traced back to my parent's genetic or emotional endowment. Even the fact that I think this way about inner space, work with these general tools of analysis and types of conceptualization, is due mostly to the fact that I am a twentieth-century American thinker who has been trained in certain ethical and religious traditions by particular teachers. In all these respects, that which appears to be mine, that which seems to be "me" or actions of my self-space, can be reduced to functions of other places and processes external to the place I hold as "I." Even the musings of my spirit, its sense of vertigo before indeterminately retreating horizons, its awe before the immensity of reality, is due in large measure to the general career of the spirit amongst my particular companions in this time and place—the teachings, art, music and revelations that have grasped and spoken to us and for us. Biologically, intellectually, even religiously, my "I" finds itself repeatedly emptied out into its contingent externalities.

But what cannot be reduced further is the fact that it is "I" who am coincident with these multiple conditionings, that it is "I" who reflect upon and know myself in this way. To be sure, we come to know ourselves—and are obliged to—by examining the external persons and processes that act in our acting and speak in our speaking. But our task at self-knowledge is incomplete until we know ourselves also as a kind of unified destiny, the firmness of an inner space which turns back upon its external constituents and asks about their meaning "for me." You can see how prideful it is, what a celebration of self, even if presented as humility before an attentive Supremacy.

Now it is true that Diderot is likely to have overspoken by assigning us the unique place in the universe where nature turns back upon itself like this. It seems probable that other experiments in conscious existence lie out there amongst the galaxies. Still, Diderot did have a key element of truth. And this is that we are at least *one of those places—*

called freedom—where the natural process leaves the immediacy of its mindless unfolding, begins to ponder the meaning of its own evolution, and refuses a dumb “acceptance of things.” This is true for us, moreover, not just collectively as a species. Each one of us individually is where nature begins to consider itself, to move back from its inner space against the external overwhelming and so become interesting.

That I am who I am provides this floor to my existence, a center even when the horizons are not fixed, a place for courage to take hold.

At heart such self-reliance is an inner awe which absorbs both shame and praise into a strange equanimity. It is the witnessing of our lives through remembered years, events and faces that can never be held and pondered in just this way again: a sense of finitude made more precious by its solitary

passing. It is the lesson not only of what we have done but what we have sustained and survived. Blows to our self-esteem, we discover, can provide curious reverse impetus for the self's discovery that it can, despite it all, still come home to and rely upon itself. And must. We learn ourselves to be the mystery of our own remembrance, this solitary witness whose story is unprecedented and wholly incapable of full recounting. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “You take your way from man, not to man.” Each of us remains, he knew, our own most fundamental instructor. “We must go alone,” he said; “I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching.”

We can criticize this as excessive individualism. But it remains true: When a man dies, a whole continent sinks. It is in this inner and irreducible immensity that the courage to hold our space as ours can find a measure of sustenance, enough to continue.