crossing the divide

from ideology to wonder

Metropolitan Pavilion, New York, February 14 -16, 2020

NEW YORK ENCOUNTER

crossing the divide

to wonder from ideology

Many people recognize that our society is deeply divided, but few have a clear idea of how polarization can be overcome, apart from generic appeals to goodwill and finding common ground. What is the source of the division? Just pointing to differences in world view, or social class or ethnicity begs the question: why have we become so unable to handle our differences? Why do we have such a hard time recognizing that we share something in common which is deeper than our artificial "identities?"

Near the end of his life, the great American novelist Walker Percy observed that ours "is the age of theory and consumption" and "the common mark of the theorist and the consumer is that neither knows who he is or what he wants outside of theorizing and consuming [because] one's self is always a leftover from one's theory."

Percy's remark has interesting implications for the theme of this year's New York Encounter: it suggests that the real divide is not primarily between people, but between abstract ideas and real life, between what we think will make us happy and what we really desire. We divide ourselves so fiercely along political and cultural lines because somehow we have allowed our theories and our false desires to displace our "self."

Fortunately, from time to time reality breaks through the wall of ideology, and then suddenly, almost magically, the barrier that seemed to separate us from other people also disappears. This is the theme of this year's New York Encounter, which this exhibit wants to explore.

Even if I am not always aware of it, the experience of division, both within myself and with other people, is a common part of my daily existence.

THINGS TO READ THINGS TO DO

Thank You for Not Breeding

Sure, the Voluntary Extinction Movement Doesn't Want You to Have Babies—But There's Much More to the Story

by Mamie Stevenson

AUG 15, 2018

Families divided in the Trump era: 'I didn't talk to my parents for weeks'

The election has been over for months, but the rancor i spawned among families, friends and couples is not fading.

Blanchette Star Tribune | MARCH 12, 2017 — 9:38AM

Everyone Is Canceled

It only takes one thing — and sometimes, nothing — for fans to dump a celebrity.

The New York Times

White Supremacy Culture

8. Either/or thinking
9. Power Hoarding
10. Fear of Open Conflict
11. Individualism

Hey Bill Nye! Would the world be better without religion?

This week, Bill Nye tackles one of the most complicated hypotheticals of all ti

Is the Joker an Incel?

Jacob Johanssen Follow

10 min read

Antifa activists say violence is necessary

BY KATIE BO WILLIAMS - 09/14/17 06:30 AM EDT

20,624 SHARES

Voting on Impeachment Inquiry Along Party Lines

Readers express disappointment in the par marked the vote and urge Democrats to "t Donald Trump."

Mattel, maker of Barbie, introduces gender-neutral dolls

The Millennials-Versus-Boomers Fight Divides the Democratic Party

The young left has become a sort of third party.

DECEMBER 10, 2019

Derek Thompson
Staff writer at The Atlantic

Teens use 'OK boomer' to fire back at older generations' criticisms

"A boomer is really more of a type of personality, someone who is intolerant to new ideas and who is ignorant to new ideas," one teen said.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

World U.S. Politics Economy Business Tech Markets Opinion Life & Arts Real Estate

One in Four Europeans Holds Anti-Semitic Views, Survey Shows

WORLD

Gun rights advocates to rally

ideology

We use the word ideology to indicate an attempt to organize reality on the basis of some partial truth, which is then logically developed into a universal instrument of interpretation and (ultimately) of domination.

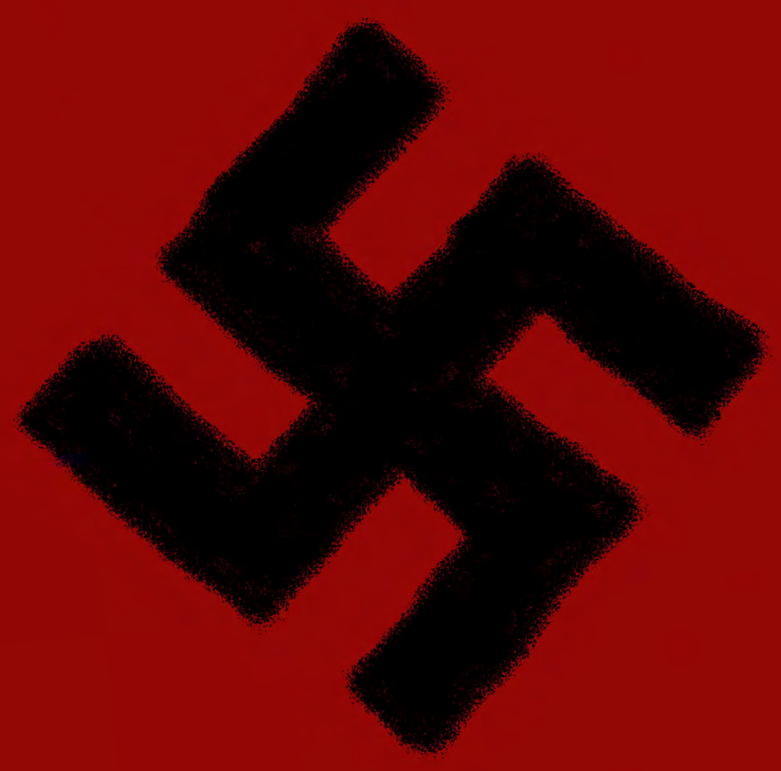
ideology as theory

Ideology is a theoretical-practical construction developed from a preconception. More precisely, it is a theoretical-practical construction based upon an *aspect* of reality – even a true aspect – which is taken unilaterally in some way and ultimately made into an absolute for the sake of a philosophy or a political project. And, since ideology is built upon some starting point of our experience, experience itself is used as a pretext for an operation determined by extraneous or exorbitant concerns. For example, in front of the "poor" one can theorize about the problem of poverty. But the concrete person with his or her wants is marginalized once he or she has been used by the intellectual as the pretext for his or her opinions, or by the politician to justify and publicize his own actions. The views of intellectuals, which the powers that be find convenient and take up as their own, become common mentality by means of the mass-media, schools and propaganda. Rosa Luxenburg, with visionary lucidity, stigmatized such a process as "the creeping advance of the theoretician" which gnaws at the root of and corrupts every authentic impetus to bring about change.

Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*

An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea. As soon as logic as a movement of thought – and not as a necessary control of thinking – is applied to an idea, the idea is transformed into a premise so that a whole line of thought can be initiated, and forced upon the mind, by drawing conclusions in the manner of mere argumentation. This argumentative process cannot be interrupted by a new idea (which would have been another premise with a different set of consequences) nor by a new experience. Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction. The danger in exchanging the necessary insecurity of philosophical thought for the total explanation of an ideology and its *Weltanschauung* is not even so much the risk of falling for some usually vulgar, always uncritical assumption, as of exchanging the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think for the strait jacket of logic with which man can force himself almost as violently as he is forced by some outside power.

Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*



Ideology has been a constant feature of modern history, which underpinned the totalitarian political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries.

Here is how two great writers depicted ideological thinking through their characters, Communist leader Rubashov in Koestler's *Darkness at Noon* and revolutionary Shivalov in Dostoevsky's *Demons*.

ideology & totalitarianism

"Never before in history was so much power over the future of mankind concentrated in so few minds as in our revolution. Every false idea we acted on became a crime against future generations. Therefore we had to punish false ideas the way we punish other crimes: with death. People considered us fanatics, because we were so consistent, because we carried our thought and actions to their logical conclusion. Like the great inquisitors we attempted to root out evil not only by prosecuting deeds; we delved into the thoughts themselves. We refused to acknowledge any private sphere, not even in the innermost space within the skull. Our lives were constrained by our own logic, by the need to think things through to the end. Because our thinking was shackled to chains of cause and effect, our feelings were constantly short-circuited. As a result we must burn each other at the stake."

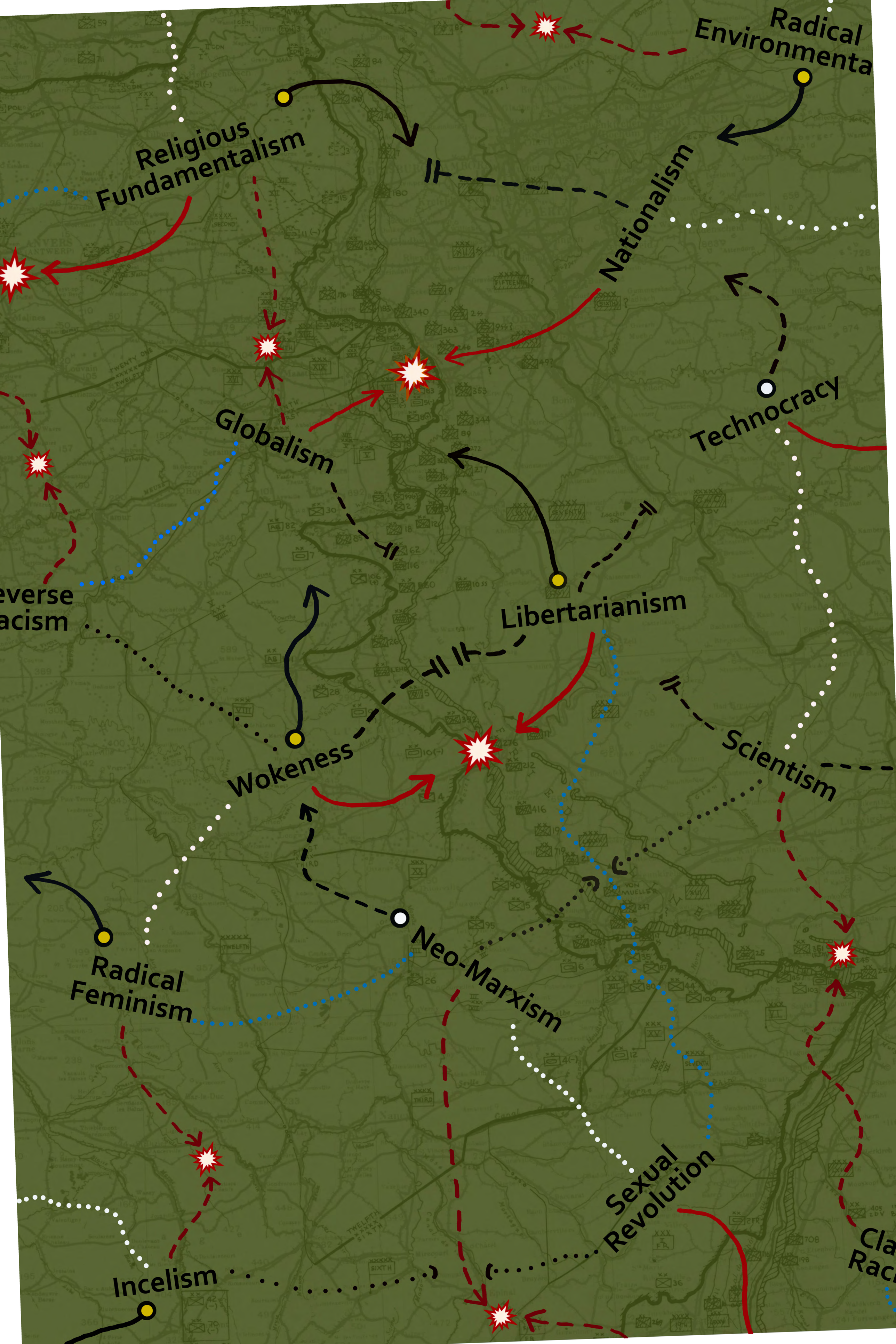
For forty years Rubashov had lived strictly by the rules of the party order. He had always followed its logical calculus, thought and acted everything through to the end. He had taken the caustic pencil of reason and burned away the vestiges of the old, illogical moral laws out of his consciousness. He had rejected the temptations of the "silent partner," had placed his faith in reason and resisted the oceanic feeling with all his might. Premises based in unassailable logic had produced completely absurd results. Perhaps thinking everything through to the end was not a healthy thing to do.

Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon*

"Gentlemen, asking your attention and, as you will see later, soliciting your aid in a matter of the first importance," Shigalov began again, "I must make some prefatory remarks. Dedicating my energies to the study of the social organization which is in the future to replace the present condition of things, I've come to the conviction that all makers of social systems from ancient times up to the present year, 187-, have been dreamers, tellers of fairy-tales, fools who contradicted themselves, who understood nothing of natural science and the strange animal called man. Plato, Rousseau, Fourier, columns of aluminum, are only fit for sparrows and not for human society. But, now that we are all at last preparing to act, a new form of social organization is essential. In order to avoid further uncertainty, I propose my own system of world-organization. Here it is." He tapped the notebook. "I wanted to expound my views to the meeting in the most concise form possible, but I see that I should need to add a great many verbal explanations, and so the whole exposition would occupy at least ten evenings, one for each of my chapters." (There was the sound of laughter.) "I must add, besides, that my system is not yet complete." (Laughter again.) "I am perplexed by my own data and my conclusion is a direct contradiction of the original idea with which I start. Starting from unlimited freedom, I arrive at unlimited despotism. I will add, however, that there can be no solution of the social problem but mine."

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Demons*

In our time, as religious and cultural identities grow weaker, ideological divisions multiply. The public arena becomes a war zone between abstractions. Fighting imaginary enemies becomes for many people an important source of identity and meaning.


Radical Environmenta
Religious Fundamentalism
Nationalism
Technocracy
Globalism
everse acism
Libertarianism
Wokeness
Scientism
Radical Feminism
Neo-Marxism
Sexual Revolution
Incelism
Cla Rac

Ideologies classify people according to abstract categories and turn politics into a conflict between classes, races, identities, etc., in which one side represents evil and oppression, and the other innocence and justice. This opposition is then used to justify domination.

ideology & polarization

In order to understand the power of this ideological mechanism, we must go way back to Jean Jacques Rousseau who said "I hate tyranny and regard it as the source of all human evils." He thus attributed to evil a historical and social origin, not a natural one. Evil no longer resided in man, but in society. Therefore he opened up a boundless career for politics, because then its goal became eliminating evil from the world. Ideology absorbs real crimes into original crimes. In this way one can turn things upside down, and turn victims into perpetrators.

The spontaneous tendency of ideology is to divide human beings into two categories: on one side those who act, who are responsible for their actions and thus can be accused; on the other side those who react: the cause for their actions remains outside themselves and thus they are innocent. A characteristic of ideology is its incapacity to count beyond two. In its scheme there are only two alternatives.

- Alain Finkielkraut in *"Libero,"* 11/7/2008

Philosophy decays into ideology by excluding from its consideration some part of the real or of the possible. Ideology is such inasmuch as it thinks "against," that is, it serves the purpose of setting one part of reality in opposition to another; in this sense it is "practical" thought (it enters the historical process as an instrument for action). This is also why its value is historically conditioned; it can decay, from an instrument that in a determined historical and cultural situation is useful to promote revolutionary action, to an instrument of asphyxia.

But clearly the historical efficacy of an ideology can only last as long as it can be mistaken for a philosophy. Its exhaustion has a particular structure: it does not merely cease, but it backfires, it becomes an instrument of the opposite side.

- Augusto Del Noce, "The Problem of Atheism"

Sometimes events – whether beautiful like the birth of a baby or scary, like a terrorist attack – break through our ideological schemes and wake us up. However, left to ourselves, we soon forget.

events jolt us out of ideology

Take for example the attacks of September 11. These horrible events shocked everybody. They were irreducible to all systematic attempts at an explanation. However, this amazement full of horror did not last, at least in France, but for a few days, a week at most. Very quickly I had the impression that reality was no longer being reported for what it was. Having recovered from amazement, commentators started saying that the US were victims of their superpower status; in other words, they were guilty of what had happened. For a few hours the commentators had been shaken by an act that had called into question their world view, because what they had depicted as the "enemy" – according to the scheme of a sort of international class struggle – had been hit by an enemy that suddenly seemed even worse. Saying that the US was victim of its superpower status was a way to digest the event: ideology had again the final word.

Alain Finkielkraut in "Libero" 11/07/2008

As an underground Communist, I took it for granted that children were out of the question. Abortion was a commonplace of party life. One day, early in 1933, my wife told me that she believed she had conceived. No man can hear from his wife, especially for the first time, that she is carrying his child, without a physical jolt of joy and pride. I felt it. But so sunk were we in that life that it was only a passing joy.We discussed the matter, and my wife said that she must go at once for a physical check and to arrange for the abortion.

When my wife came back, she was quiet and noncommittal. The doctor had said that there was a child. "What else did he say?" I asked. "He said that I am in good physical shape to have a baby." Very slowly the truth dawned on me. "Do you mean," I asked, "that you want to have the child?"

My wife came over to me, took my hands and burst into tears."Dear heart," she said in a pleading voice, "we couldn't do that awful thing to a little baby, not to a little baby, dear heart." A wild joy swept me. Reason, the agony of my family, the Communist party and its theories, the wars and revolutions of the 20th century, crumbled at the touch of the child. Both of us simply wanted a child. If the points on the long course of my break with Communism could be retraced, that is probably one of them – not at the level of the conscious mind, but at the level of unconscious life.

Whitaker Chambers, *Witness*

Ultimately, in order not to fall back into ideology, we need an event that keeps happening, like the presence of a friend or loved one. This type of friendship that brings us back to reality is the definition of authority.

we need an event that keeps happening

Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking into the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

It's because it corresponds to you that I say: "Do this, pay attention to this other person." I say it to you out of love for your life. And you know what makes me capable of saying it to you out of love for your life? Love for my own life. It's because I've taken my own life seriously that I tell you, "Look, please, because this is important for your life. If you follow me, you will understand. And then, after, you'll follow yourself. Following me is like following yourself, we're friends"… this becomes yours and you have to follow yourself. This is following your own conscience. Your own true conscience is really the very conscience that's made great and mature by an encounter. And this makes people friends.

Luigi Giussani, *Is it Possible to Live this Way: Faith*

The moment you are absent, my love for you shows itself to be what it is, a giant, in which are crowded together all the energy of my spirit and all the character of my heart. It makes me feel like a man again, because I feel a great passion; and the multifariousness, in which study and modern education entangle us, and the skepticism which necessarily makes us find fault with all subjective and objective impressions, all of these are entirely designed to make us all small and weak and whining. But love, not love for the Feuerbach-type of man, not for the metabolism, not for the proletariat — but the love for the beloved and particularly for you, makes a man again a man…

Karl Marx, from a letter to his wife

wonder

Many of the speakers participating in this year's New York Encounter have faced the danger of ideology in themselves or in others. Here are some of their stories. In each instance, the encounter with new friends made it possible to overcome ideology and to return to a position of wonder in front of reality.

daryl davis

This guy, he was an Exalted Cyclops sitting in my car, in my passenger seat. He made a statement which I'd heard before. He said we all know that all black people have within them a gene that makes them violent. I said, wait a minute. I'm as black as anybody you've ever seen. I have never done a carjacking or a drive-by. How do you explain that? He didn't even pause to think about it. He said, your gene is latent, it hasn't come out yet. So how do you argue with somebody who is that far out in left field?

I thought about it for a minute. Then I said, well, we know that all white people have a gene within them that makes them a serial killer. And he says, what do you mean? And I said, well, name me three black serial killers. He thought about it. He could not do it. I said Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, Charles Manson, John Wayne Gacy. All white. I said, son, you are a serial killer. He says, Daryl, I've never killed anybody. I said, your gene is latent. It hasn't come out yet. He goes, well, that's stupid. I said, well, duh, you're right. What I said was stupid, but no more stupid than what you said about me. And he got very, very quiet. And then he changed the subject. Five months later, based on that conversation, he left the Klan. His robe was the first robe I ever got.

When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting. It's when the talking ceases that the ground becomes fertile for violence. If you spend five minutes with your worst enemy - and it doesn't have to be about race. It could be about anything - abortion, the war in Iraq, global warming, the presidency, any hot topic. You will find that you both have something in common. As you build upon those commonalities, you are forming a relationship. As you build upon that relationship, you're forming a friendship. And that's what would happen. I didn't convert anybody. They saw the light and converted themselves.

NPR interview, August 20, 2017

chris arnade

Ten years ago I was a banker, living in an expensive apartment in an expensive Brooklyn neighborhood. I thought, like most people I was surrounded by, that the best way to understand an issue was by going to the experts. We thought of the impact of policy only in the aggregate and only in measurable terms, never at individual level. What was best for a country, or the world, was what was best for the most people, and that generally meant what increased the GDP, or increased trade, or increased efficiency. Science, like for almost everyone around me, was my religion, although I would have never described it as that. Faith was never something I mocked, that wasn't my style, but many around me did. I didn't respect it though, viewing it as outdated and inefficient.

I had always taken long walks, sometimes as long as fifteen miles, to explore and reduce stress, but now the walks began to evolve. I started walking the less seen parts of New York City, the parts people claimed were unsafe or uninteresting. Along the walk I talked to whoever talked to me, and I let their suggestions, not my instincts and maps, navigate me. I also used my camera to take portraits of those I met, and I became more and more drawn to the stories people inevitably wanted to share about their life. The walks, the portraits, the stories I heard, the places they took me, became a process of learning in a different kind of way. Not from textbooks, or statistics, or spreadsheets, or PowerPoint presentations, or classrooms, or speeches, or documentaries — but from people.

What I started seeing, and learning, was just how cloistered and privileged my world was and how narrow and selfish I was. Not just in how I lived but in how I thought. This was a slow and shocking revelation to me, one I kept trying to fight.

It was three years of seeing just how messy life really is. How filled with pain, injustice, ambiguity, and problems too big for any one policy to address. It was also three years of seeing how resilient people can be, how community can thrive anywhere, even amid pain and poverty. Most of all I ended up finding what is often overlooked in stigmatized neighborhoods: dignity.

christian picciolini

They held up peace fingers, and we flipped them off, taunting them with racist epithets. They carried signs demanding world peace. We thought we carried the weight of the world. That's when it dawned on me: I ached for Lisa more than anything, more than I wanted a white homeland even. For a brief moment I became lost in scanning the faces of some of the counter-protestors. I felt for the first time as if I were coming face to face with some of the people from my past. There was the gay brother one of my friends had, who was always interesting and funny and kept mostly to himself. And my black team-mates from my Eisenhower football team who had never given me trouble despite the horrible things I said about them and the violence I facilitated. The thoughts and words from the last five years of my life were taking on new resonance in my head — as if I were hearing things I'd said played back to me, and they sounded like they were in someone else's voice.

Why was I here and not at home with my pregnant wife whom I adored, with my hand on her belly, taking in every moment with her? I suddenly felt guilty and out of sorts.

There were fellow skinheads here too, "brothers" and "sisters" whom I related to from neighborhoods like I came from, urban jungles, rather than Southern swamps. But even with them, I was starting to question what this struggle was about.

It was about pride, I rationalized, being proud of our white heritage and standing up against those who wanted to take that away from us. My thoughts drifted back to my earliest memory of holding Lisa in my arms, her pleading eyes searching deep inside me for my truth. "Why do you have so much hate inside of you?" she'd questioned. "You're so caring and gentle to me sometimes. Which one is the real you?" Suddenly I wasn't so sure.

Not long afterwards, our son Devin was born. Caressed by the soft, gentle breath of our fragile son, I was carried away momentarily from the uncertain reality of being a nineteen-year-old father shouldering the vestiges of a fraying cause. My son's life was in my hands, both literally and figuratively, and never had I been charged with a greater purpose. For the first time in my adult life, I broke down and wept.

from White American Youth by Christian Picciolini

bassam aramin

Over a hundred armed soldiers then suddenly appeared and ordered us to strip naked. They beat us until we could hardly stand. I was held the longest and beaten the hardest. What struck me was that all the soldiers wore smiles on their faces. They were beating us without hatred, because for them this was just a training exercise and they saw us as objects.

As I was being beaten, I remembered a movie I'd seen the year before about the Holocaust. At the time I'd been happy that Hitler had killed six million Jews. I remember wishing that he'd killed them all, because then I would never have been sent to prison. But some minutes into the movie, I found myself crying and feeling angry that the Jews were being herded into gas chambers without fighting back. If they knew they were going to die, why didn't they scream out? I tried to hide my tears from the other prisoners who wouldn't have understood why I was crying about the pain of my oppressors. It was the first time I felt empathy.

The incident with the soldiers made me realize that we had to preserve our humanity – our right to laugh and our right to cry – in order to save ourselves. I also slowly realized that the Israeli oppression was because of the Holocaust, and I decided to try to understand who the Jews were. This led to a conversation with a prison guard. The guards all thought of us as terrorists and we hated them, but this guard asked me, "How can someone quiet like you become a terrorist?" I replied, "No, you're the terrorist. I'm a freedom fighter." He really believed that we, the Palestinians, were the settlers, not the Israelis. I said, "If you can convince me that we are the settlers, then I'll declare this in front of all the prisoners."

It was the start of a dialogue and a friendship. We discovered many similarities and some months later the guard said he understood now that we were not the settlers. He even became a supporter of the Palestinian struggle. From then on he always treated us with respect, and once even smuggled in two big bottles of Coca Cola, which I shared with all the other prisoners. Seeing how this transformation happened through dialogue and without force made me realize that the only way to peace was through non-violence. Our dialogue enabled us both to see each other's purity of heart and good intent.

from theforgivenessproject.com

jeanne bishop

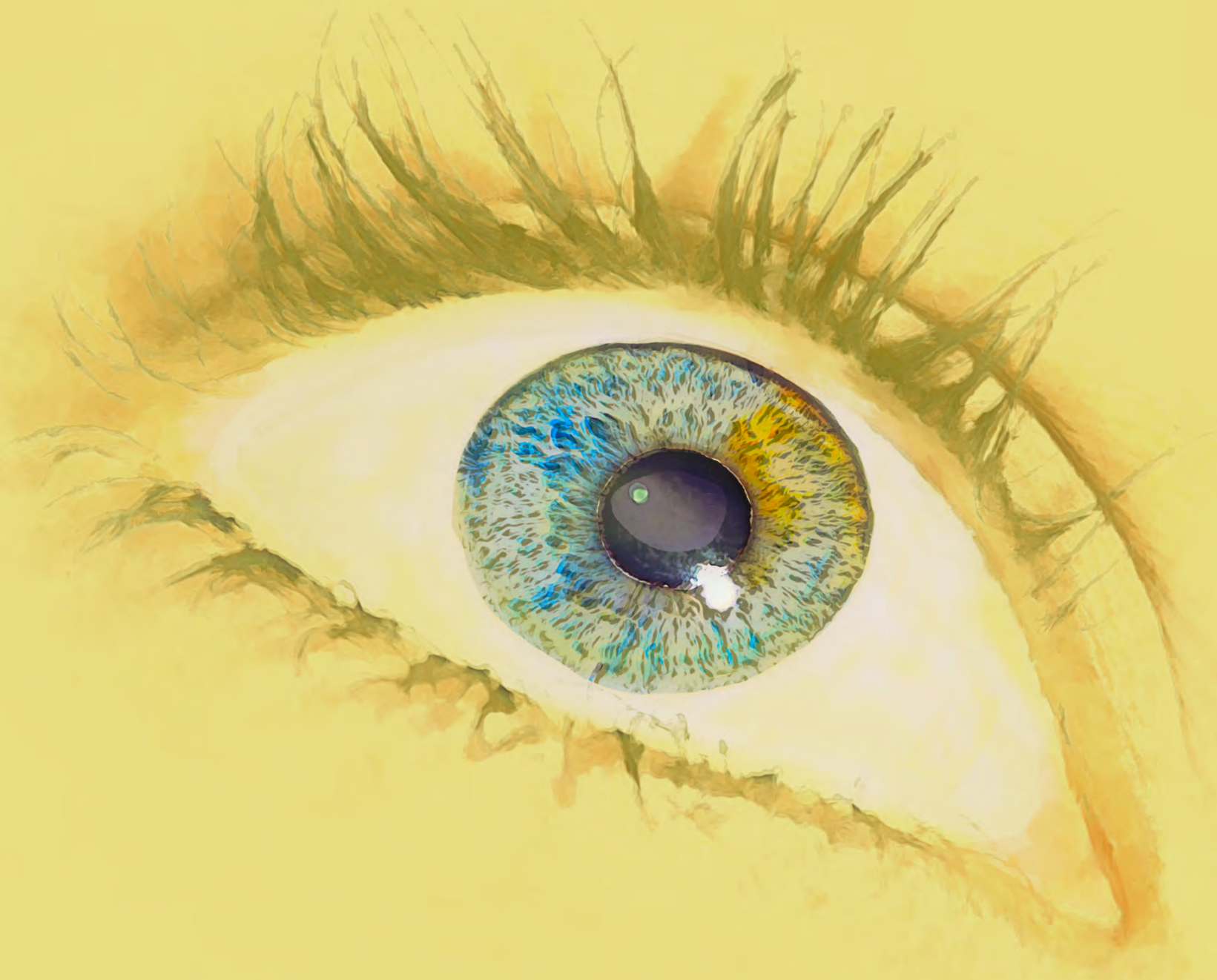
For a long time, my experience as a public defender supported my belief that some people deserved life sentences. One client chilled me to the core. As a juvenile, he had graduated from burglary and auto theft to armed robbery, holding up three separate victims in the course of two days. The first victim was a young mother playing with her kids in a park; the second was an 11-year-old on a bike. My client preyed on the vulnerable. When he took their property at gunpoint, he said the same thing: "I want that." It was the object he cared about; the people meant nothing to him.

I recognized something of David Biro in him. David is the man who murdered my sister, Nancy, her husband, Richard, and their unborn child. After a long struggle, I had forgiven David, said his name, even prayed for him. But I still wasn't certain I wanted him to serve less than his full life sentence. David was serving a mandatory life sentence for killing Nancy and Richard. He was serving a discretionary life sentence for intentionally killing their unborn child. But changes to sentencing procedures for juveniles by a Supreme Court ruling meant that David was likely to seek a resentencing hearing to reduce at least part of his sentence to less than life. I had no idea whether I could support the release of David at such a hearing. "He's still remorseless," I told a friend.

"How do you know that?" he responded, leaning across the table. "You don't know that. You've never even spoken to him." I was stunned. He was right.

I had spoken about the murders and forgiveness all over the world: France, Ireland, Mongolia, Japan and all across the United States. I had written articles about forgiving David Biro, given speeches at churches and schools and conferences. But one person I had not told: him. Never once had I communicated my forgiveness to David Biro. I had waited all these years for him to apologize to me. I saw it now with startling clarity: I had to apologize to him, for never telling him that I had forgiven him. I had to go first.

from America Magazine, April 6, 2015



Concepts create idols; only wonder knows anything. People kill one another over idols. Wonder makes us fall to our knees.

- St. Gregory of Nyssa

crossing the divide

from ideology to wonder

curators

Joseph Arizpe
Carlo Lancellotti
Marcia Otto

designer

John Touhey