

WITHIN OR BENEATH THE DIN

By Michael Ventura

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There is no act more communal than speech, a shared language. We depend upon each other to keep the integrity of that language. So there is no worse corruption than speech meant to mean nothing. American public speech has become a verbal nothingness in which anything can mean anything, and it corrupts our very air. The only antidote is the private speech of people whose eyes you trust, people who still value words and say what they mean. We must not lose our awareness that, under the din of falsehood, many speak with the authority of their experience and not as the scribes and Pharisees. To testify to the value of such speech, to its very existence within or beneath the din, I'll record some here:

Kathleen has a son in the Marines and in this, her 50th year, she's twice become a grandma. As America's invasion of Iraq began she wrote this letter: "Sometimes I think of us exactly ... as a mortal wholeness made up of all our hearts and voices, that can sing and love and by our actions destroy ourselves as deliberately as if we cut ourselves with knives. And even while I find almost everything going on to be incomprehensible, I know it's such a gift to be alive with all of the people alive at once, right now, all the people that we pass among and that we touch, and who share our breath. I also sometimes think that it's no wonder that, given the intolerances and the disaffection and the deliberate cruelty we mete out, that it regularly accumulates into the kind of absurdity that's mounting now, and as we're each named by it, we must be ashamed before it. I don't even know how to speak the words. The world's march is making me feel pretty crazy -- the wild unpinning of the worst of us. I've written to politicians and newspapers, talked to people eruptively, attended vigils, and stood on street corners feeling like the mortal remains of some thought that glowed briefly in the distant past and then went out ... making it up every day how to live. Living prayer, as I've always tried to pray, without hope (which may be the opposite of hopelessness), without solace, with every gesture, trusting past every veil. And I feel myself on both sides of the veil. [My son] in a machine gun nest training for combat ... and suddenly I'm afraid of sunsets, anything of spectacular beauty, that might be a distraction to the terrible business of surviving when blood is the wager -- but what do you live for, any of us, but those moments that contain a kind of breathlessness and humbleness, and gratitude? ...

"When something is broken inside you, the brokenness remains the reality against which everything else is measured. You step each day into the light, haunted by a lost world. The haunting is the truest substance, both stern and lavish. ... We are of our own making, and everything we do collectively expresses that, but it can only be affected by individual effort, because that's how it's given to us -- our power as individuals, to think to express to feel to witness to be compassionate and to be vigilant about our own relationship to creation to each other to the earth and sky and all who live and breathe and pass before us and after us. Aware of our fragility in the abyss. Haunted, and the haunting the only solace. I read the paper blindly these days -- where I used to read it meticulously and cut out certain things as though they would shed some kind of understanding, some path, I no longer look for anything, I can no longer bear it. ... I'm thinking of a Yeats

poem dismissing the scouring for information (though this isn't a quote, it's an approximation): I want to be like dawn -- ignorant and wanton."

That week of war when all reports were contradictory and it seemed (still seems) that the world was strangling in its sleep, I posed a question to my high school kids: How do you live in a waking reality that behaves with the cruel surreality of a dream that seems never to end?

Adam (11th grade): "Love. Less than a second after the last word ... exited your lips, love came to mind without pause. ... Love is something real in this world of dreams. I've observed that the farther we pull away from the old world of reality and into the faded landscape of a dreamland, the more we become confused as to what love is and means in our dismal lives. ... I feel real when I love. ... I am made to feel lost in my *own* feelings by the world I am part of. Love is the only hold on reality that I can grasp onto."

Lizzie (12th grade): "This war, this goddamned war has instilled not only in myself, but in many, a fear that has never been felt. ... The power of collective fear is the most vulnerable, unprotected feeling a society can have. The American fear is allowing our lives to be taken from us and changed forever. ... In this time, we are not asleep, nor awake. We are in a state of sleepwalking -- a zombielike life in which our subconscious takes over and the only thing we know is our fear, and the only people we trust are those we can see, and the only way to stay awake is to sleep."

Giovanni (10th grade): "Bravery is the most magnificent tool to stay awake in a world of illusions. ... Truth is, we are all one. We are made of one ingredient, love. Love is all there is. Love is total stillness (peace). Hate is fear expressed, fear is that which you are not. Stay in touch with that scary feeling we now call love, because it ain't scary. Trust it, it will lead you out of the illusion you are living."

Molly (9th grade): "These are predictions of the past lives in our hands. What then becomes of our hands? ... I have succumbed to the dream! But in turn the dream has succumbed to me. But I am part of the dream. Now I feel closed, or now I notice I am closed ... and I've enjoyed it too much to look out and be real. ... In truth there is no medium. There's no limbo, safety, mediator. Because there are no polarities. They are all dreams. No matter what kind, a dream is a dream, no holes, tunnels, passages, nothing. Just solid, infinite dream."

Maya (10th grade): "Maybe we're really asleep and the only time we're really awake is when we're sleeping. Maybe the only time I can pay attention is when I'm sleeping, for that is the only time I am awake enough to grasp all of my surroundings. The dream in which a nation is falling to pieces, technology is at a peak, and commercials are all that is seen. Sounds more like a nightmare I should go back to sleep for. In this awakeness state I am in, how is it possible for me to fully understand all I see? Is it all a painted picture? Even when I am awake I dream. I don't have a complete answer for your question for I'm still in amazement that man can fly, not only in dreams. Let's go have a tea party."

Sophie (9th grade): "If we are living a dream, the dream is us, and everything we create. You move, talk, walk, in a dream. You are the dream. The only way you can stay awake in a dream is to live it. Open your eyes and face it. Be it. Feel it. Don't back away from the dream around you that weaves you with it. We are all the dream, the freedom, the war, the peace. ... Realize that you create your own reality, you create the dream you are living. Because you are the dream, you and everyone and thing around you. We place ourselves in this world, this dream, to learn the lesson we need for our life. Running away from the tide only takes us more on the path of sleep. We need to hold each other in our

dream with no judgment. Love one another for the dreams. Be as a white dove over a pale sky, graceful, feeling the pain. Feeling your feelings. Stay awake."

Meg (12th grade): "The only way not to be consumed by your tears is to let them fall to the ground. In such a time as this, it is important to utilize what you know, what you have always thought to be true -- and use your creativity as a tool to break yourself out of the box."

A missive from Brendan, who will be 30 this year: "When tyranny triumphs the jester is the only one left with any ammunition. Know what I mean? How the oppressor hates it when you laugh in his face? Or maybe the dreamer who ignores him and only sees the beauty that he can't?"

And a 10th-grader, Vinita: "I think the fundamental question is not how to stay awake but whether we are awake at all. And if so, we can move on, but if not, the next step would logically be asking how to wake up or even if we want to wake up at all. ... Why create complex societies, class-specific dialects, billions of words ... just for a dream I wake up from the next day?"

"So how to stay awake, if it turns out we are? Dream. Dream big and shape your reality to it. Only by giving ourselves absolute reign over our consciousness, can we retain every ounce of self, and if we don't allow ourselves to dream we'll be disobeying ourselves every time we fall asleep.

"And if this is all a dream, fuck it. I'm staying."

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