

Faith and Violence

Christian Teaching and
Christian Practice

Thomas Merton
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Events and Pseudo-Events:

Letter to a Southern Churchman

I HAVE PUBLICLY STATED THAT I WOULD NO LONGER COMMENT on current events. People ask why. There are many reasons, and I might as well say at once that they are reasons which may possibly be valid for me only, not for others. In any case I did not make this decision for anyone but myself. Nor would I have made it unless I had previously made my position clear in the areas of greatest urgency—race and peace.

First of all, I mistrust an obsession with declarations and pronouncements. While silence can constitute guilt and complicity, once one has taken a stand he is not necessarily obliged to come out with a new answer and a new solution to insoluble problems every third day.

After all, was it not Bonhoeffer himself who said it was an "Anglo-Saxon failing" to imagine that the Church was supposed to have a ready answer for every social problem?

When one has too many answers, and when one joins a chorus of others chanting the same slogans, there is, it seems to me, a danger that one is trying to evade the loneliness of a conscience that realizes itself to be in an inescapably evil situation. We are all under judgment. None of us is free from contamination. Our choice is not that of being pure and whole at the mere cost of formulating a just and honest opinion. Mere commitment to a decent program of action does not lift the curse. Our real choice is between being like Job, who *knew* he was stricken, and Job's friends who did

not know that they were stricken too—though less obviously than he. (So they had answers!)

If we *know* that we are all under judgment, we will cease to make the obvious wickedness of “the others” a fulcrum for our own supposed righteousness to exert itself upon the world. On the contrary, we will be willing to admit that we are “right-wised” not by condemning others according to our law or ethical ideal, but by seeing that the real sinner whom we find abominable and frightening (because he threatens our very life) still has in himself the ground for God’s love, the same ground that is in our own sinful and deluded hearts.

To justify ourselves is to justify our sin and to call God a liar.

Second, there is the nature of my own vocation to the monastic, solitary, contemplative life—the vocation of Job! Of course this monastic life does not necessarily imply a total refusal to have anything to do with the world. Such a refusal would, in any case, be illusory. It would deceive no one but the monk himself. It is not possible for anyone, however isolated from the world, to say “I will no longer concern myself with the affairs of the world.” We cannot help being implicated. We can be guilty even by default. But the monastic and contemplative life does certainly imply a very special perspective, a viewpoint which others do not share, the viewpoint of one who is not directly engaged in the struggles and controversies of the world. Now it seems to me that if a monk is permitted to be detached from these struggles over particular interests, it is only in order that he may give more thought to the interests of all, to the whole question of the reconciliation of all men with one another in Christ. One is permitted, it seems to me, to stand back from parochial and partisan concerns, if one can thereby hope to get a better view of the whole problem and mystery of man.

A contemplative will, then, concern himself with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems—not by analysis but by simplicity. This of course is no easy task, and I cannot claim that I have discovered anything worth saying. Yet since I have been asked to say something, I will at least hazard a few conjectures. Take them for what they may be worth: they are subjective, they are provisional, they are mere intuitions, they will certainly need to be completed by the thinking of others. If they suggest a few useful perspectives to others, then I am satisfied.

I am more and more impressed by the fact that it is largely futile to get up and make statements about current problems. At the same time, I know that silent acquiescence in evil is also out of the question. I know too that there are times when protest is inescapable, even when it seems as useless as beating your head up against a brick wall. At the same time, when protest simply becomes an act of desperation, it loses its power to communicate anything to anyone who does not share the same feelings of despair.

There is of course no need to comment on the uselessness of false optimism, or to waste any attentions on the sunlit absurdities of those who consistently refuse to face reality. One cannot be a Christian today without having a deeply afflicted conscience. I say it again: we are all under judgment. And it seems to me that our gestures of repentance, though they may be individually sincere, are collectively hollow and even meaningless. Why?

This is the question that plagues me.

The reason seems to be, to some extent, a deep failure of communication.

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There is a great deal of talk today about the Church and the world, about secular Christianity, religionless religion

and so on. It seems to me that religionless religion is certainly a result of this failure of communication. (Here I am distinguishing Bonhoeffer's disciples from Bonhoeffer himself.) Seeing that traditional and biblical language simply does not ring any bells in the minds of modern men, the apostles of religionless religion have discarded that language and decided thereby to avoid the problem of communication altogether. Having done so, however, they seem to have also gotten rid of any recognizable Christian message. To reconcile man with man and not with God is to reconcile no one at all. It is the old problem of the social Gospel over again. When the life expectancy of the average secular ideology today is about five years (barring a few notable exceptions that have become orthodoxies, like Marxism and Freudianism) it seems rather irresponsible to identify the Gospel with one or the other of them.

Assuming then that the Church has something to communicate to the world that the world does not already know, what does this imply? First of all, we must try to clarify the relation of the Church to the world. It seems to me false simply to say that the Church and the world should be considered as perfectly identified, as indistinguishable, and leave it at that. After all, there is still I John 2: 15-16 to be considered.

This judgment of the world as by definition *closed in upon itself* and therefore *closed to any revelation that demands to break through its defensive shell* is surely one of the key ideas of the New Testament. By the Incarnation and Cross Christ does in fact *break through* the defensive shell not only of sin and passionate attachment, but of all ethical and religious systems that strive to make man self-sufficient in his own worldly realm.

The Church and the world are related in a dialectic of identity and non-identity, yes and no, nearness and dis-

tance. The Church is Christ present in the world to reconcile the world to Himself. The world is therefore not purely and simply Christ. There is a question of acceptance or refusal. If we are dealing with the self-revelation of a cosmic Christ who is gradually becoming visible in man, simply as *man*, the decision for this Christ becomes a kind of poetic commitment to pantheistic vitalism or something of the sort, not an acceptance of the Gospel in the obedience of faith. In other words "Christ" is then only a symbol for the world as a closed-system. Such a symbol may seem inspiring; but it is idolatrous. Further, if Christ is simply manifesting himself in man's history, whether we do anything about it or not, then there is no need either of dialogue or of dialectic between the Church and the world. By this dialectic of challenge, faith and love, word and response, we break out of the closed system. If we forsake this forward movement toward eschatological fulfillment, then we plunge into the interminable circling of the world upon itself. No amount of religious cliches can make this encapsulation a true "freedom."

It seems to me that one of the great obligations of the Christian is to keep the eyes of his faith clear of such confusions. And the monk above all has to keep free from this circling-in-desperation, this closed system, which is essentially pagan and which implies a hidden servitude to the elements and the powers of the air in St. Paul's sense (Galatians 4: 3,9). (I readily admit, with Luther, that in practice the monk who makes monasticism a "law" automatically fails in his primal obligation.)

Though there are certainly more ways than one of preserving the freedom of the sons of God, the way to which I was called and which I have chosen is that of the monastic life.

Paul's view of the "elements" and the "powers of the air" was couched in the language of the cosmology of his day.

Translated into the language of our own time, I would say these mysterious realities are to be sought where we least expect them, not in what is most remote and mysterious, but in what is most familiar, what is near at hand, what is at our elbow all day long—what speaks or sings in our ear, and practically does our thinking for us. The “powers” and “elements” are precisely what stand between the world and Christ. It is they who stand in the way of reconciliation. It is they who, by influencing all our thinking and behavior in so many unsuspected ways, dispose us to decide *for* the world *as against* Christ, thus making reconciliation impossible.

Clearly, the “powers” and “elements” which in Paul’s day dominated men’s minds through pagan religion or through religious legalism, today dominate us in the confusion and the ambiguity of the Babel of tongues that we call mass-society. Certainly I do not condemn everything in the mass-media. But how does one stop to separate the truth from the half-truth, the event from the pseudo-event, reality from the manufactured image? It is in this confusion of images and myths, superstitions and ideologies that the “powers of the air” govern our thinking—even our thinking about religion! Where there is no critical perspective, no detached observation, no time to ask the pertinent questions, how can one avoid being deluded and confused?

Someone has to try to keep his head clear of static and preserve the interior solitude and silence that are essential for independent thought.

A monk loses his reason for existing if he simply submits to all the routines that govern the thinking of everybody else. He loses his reason for existing if he simply substitutes other routines of his own! He is obliged by his vocation to have his *own mind* if not to speak it. He has got to be a free man.

What did the radio say this evening? I don’t know.

What was on TV? I have watched TV twice in my life. I am frankly not terribly interested in TV anyway. Certainly I do not pretend that by simply refusing to keep up with the latest news I am therefore unaffected by what goes on, or *free* of it all. Certainly events happen and they affect me as they do other people. It is important for me to know about them too: but I refrain from trying to know them in their fresh condition as “news.” When they reach me they have become slightly stale. I eat the same tragedies as others, but in the form of tasteless crusts. The news reaches me in the long run through books and magazines, and no longer as a stimulant. Living without news is like living without cigarettes (another peculiarity of the monastic life). The need for this habitual indulgence quickly disappears. So, when you hear news without the “need” to hear it, it treats you differently. And you treat it differently too.

In this perspective you are perhaps able to distinguish the real happening from the pseudo-event. Nine tenths of the news, as printed in the papers, is pseudo-news, manufactured events. Some days ten tenths. The ritual morning trance, in which one scans columns of newsprint, creates a peculiar form of generalized pseudo-attention to a pseudo-reality. This experience is taken seriously. It is one’s daily immersion in “reality.” One’s orientation to the rest of the world. One’s way of reassuring himself that he has not fallen behind. That he is still there. That he still counts!

My own experience has been that renunciation of this self-hypnosis, of this participation in the unquiet universal trance, is no sacrifice of reality at all. To “fall behind” in this sense is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe and to see a little more clearly.

When you get a clearer picture you can understand why so many want to stand in the dust cloud, where there is comfort in confusion.

The things that actually happen are sometimes incredibly horrible.

The fog of semi-rational verbiage with which the events are surrounded is also terrible, but in a different way.

And then, beside the few real horrors, there are the countless pseudo-events, the come-on's, the releases, the statements, the surmises, the slanders, the quarrels, the insults and the interminable self-advertising of the image-makers.

We believe that the "news" has a strange metaphysical status outside us: it "happens" by itself. Actually, it is something we fabricate. Those who are poor artisans make only pseudo-events. These are the tired politicians and businessmen, the educators, writers, intellectuals and tiredest of all, the Churchmen.

Others are better at it: they know how to make real bad news!

. . .

Reading the Vulgate I run across the Latin word *simulacrum* which has implications of a mask-like deceptiveness, of intellectual cheating, of an ideological shell-game. The word *simulacrum*, it seems to me, presents itself as a very suggestive one to describe an advertisement, or an over-inflated political presence, or that face on the TV screen. The word shimmers, grins, cajoles. It is a fine word for something monumentally phony. It occurs for instance in the last line of the First Epistle of John. But there it is usually translated as "idols" . . . "Little Children, watch out for the simulacra!"—watch out for the national, the regional, the institutional images!

Does it not occur to us that if, in fact, we live in a society which is par excellence that of the *simulacrum*, we are the champion idolaters of all history? No, it does not occur to us, because for us an idol is nothing more than a harmless

Greek statue, complete with a figleaf, in the corner of the museum. We have given up worrying about idols—as well as devils. And we are living in the age of science. How could we, the most emancipated of men, be guilty of superstition? Could science itself be our number one superstition?

You see where my rambling has brought me. To this: we are under judgment. And what for? For the primal sin. We are idolaters. We make *simulacra* and we hypnotize ourselves with our skill in creating these mental movies that do not appear to be idols because they are so alive! Because we are idolaters, because we have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the semblance of the likeness of mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds, of reptiles . . ." we fulfill all the other requirements of those who are under God's wrath, as catalogued by Paul in Romans 1: 24-32.

Our idols are by no means dumb and powerless. The sardonic diatribes of the prophets against images of wood and stone do not apply to our images that live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us and lead us off to kill. Not only are we idolaters, but we are likely to carry out point by point the harlotries of the Apocalypse. And if we do, we will do so innocently, decently, with clean hands, for the blood is always shed somewhere else! The smoke of the victims is always justified by some clean sociological explanation, and of course it is not supersitition because we are by definition the most enlightened people that ever happened.

The things that we do, the things that make our news, the things that are contemporary, are abominations of superstition, of idolatry, proceeding from minds that are full of myths, distortions, half-truths, prejudices, evasions, illusions, lies: in a word—*simulacra*. Ideas and conceptions that look good but aren't. Ideals that claim to be humane and prove themselves, in their effects, to be callous, cruel, cynical, sometimes even criminal.

We have no trouble at all detecting all this in the ideologies of *other* nations, other social groups. That is at least something! But it is not enough. We cannot begin to face our real problems until we admit that these evils are universal. We see them in others because they are in ourselves. Until we admit that we are subject to the same risks and the same follies, the same evils and the same fanaticisms, only in different forms, under different appearances (*simulacra*) we will continue to propose solutions that make our problems insoluble. We will continue to be deadlocked with adversaries who happen to be our own mirror image.

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My thesis is now clear: in my opinion the root of our trouble is that our habits of thought and the drives that proceed from them are basically idolatrous and mythical. We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive and the most humane. This, in fact, is an "image" of ourselves—an image which is false and is also the object of a cult. We worship ourselves in this image. The nature of our acts is determined in large measure by the demands of our worship. Because we have an image (*simulacrum*) of ourselves as fair, objective, practical and humane, we actually make it more difficult for ourselves to be what we think we are. Since our "objectivity" for instance is in fact an image of ourselves as "objective," we soon take our objectivity for granted, and instead of checking the facts, we simply manipulate the facts to fit our pious conviction. In other words, instead of taking care to examine the realities of our political or social problems, we simply bring out the idols in solemn procession. "We are the ones who are right, *they* are the ones who are wrong. We are the good guys, *they* are the bad guys. We

are honest, *they* are crooks." In this confrontation of images, "objectivity" ceases to be a consistent attention to fact and becomes a devout and blind fidelity to myth. If the adversary is by definition wicked, then objectivity consists simply in refusing to believe that he can possibly be honest in any circumstances whatever. If facts seem to conflict with images, then we feel that we are being tempted by the devil, and we determine that we will be all the more blindly loyal to our images. To debate with the devil would be to yield! Thus in support of realism and objectivity we simply determine beforehand that we will be swayed by no fact whatever that does not accord perfectly with our own preconceived judgment. Objectivity becomes simple dogmatism.

As I say, we can see this mechanism at work in the Communists. We cannot see it in ourselves. True, of course, our dogmatism is not as blatant, as rigid, as bureaucratically dense, as monolithic. It is nonetheless real. That is to say, it is based on *refusals* that are just as categorical and just as absolute.

These refusals are made necessary by a primary commitment to a false image which is the object of superstitious worship. The fact that the image is not made of stone or metal, but of ideas, slogans and pseudo-events only makes it all the more dangerous.

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A more complex syndrome in our mythical thinking. I shall call it "justification by snake-handling."

Let me say at once that I am not trying to ridicule the good, simple people in the Tennessee mountains or in North Carolina who every once in a while gather in their little Churches, work themselves up into a state of exaltation and then pass around a live rattlesnake from hand to hand. There is a kind of rugged starkness about this primitive

fundamentalism that calls for a certain respect, and I am reminded that in the novels of Flannery O'Connor due honor was not denied to primitives. The people Flannery O'Connor depised were those whose mental snake-handling was more polite and less risky, more sophisticated and adroit, more complacent and much less honest, based on the invocation not of Mark 16:18, but of something at once more sinister, more modern and more obscure.

I take the mountain people as my starting point simply because in them the cycle is stark and clinically clear. And they are aware of what they are doing.

The rest of us do it without recognizing the analogy.

I do not say we do it every day. Snake-handling is reserved for moments of crisis, when we feel ourselves and our myths called into question. It is our reaction to deep stirring of guilt about ourselves and our images. We handle snakes in order to restore the image to a place of perfect security.

In Christian terms, the mental snake-handling is an attempt to evade judgment when our conscience obscurely tells us that we are under judgment. It represents recourse to a daring and ritual act, a magic gesture that is visible and recognized by others, which proves to us that we are right, that the image is right, that our rightness cannot be contested, and whoever contests it is a minion of the devil.

Here is the scenario.

First, a drab, uninteresting or over-organized, bored existence. Or at least an obscure feeling that your life is not quite as meaningful as it ought to be. That there is not only something lacking, but probably *everything* lacking. The more obscure and diffuse the feeling, the better. If you are hardly aware of it at all, fine. Most Americans on any day of the week can, if they reflect a little on it, see that they easily meet these qualifications. Even if one has all he needs in material goods, he can still feel as if he lacked *everything!*

Second, you have to connive with a group of other people who feel the same way, at least implicitly. You may perhaps come to an agreement with them in actual discussion together, or you may simply (more often than not) find that you and a lot of other people have all seen the same thing on TV or somewhere and are all reacting to it in the same way. I will not go into bizarre details about snake-handling in small fanatical groups of adepts and snake-handling on the national level. Let's keep it simple. First, you are bored and dissatisfied. Second, you find yourself in collusion with others who react as you do to some event.

Implicitly or explicitly you agree on some course of action which is at the same time *symbolic, arbitrary and dangerous*. These three characteristics are essential. There may be others. But at least the act has to be symbolic. If the symbolism is unconscious, so much the better. The act or event has to be arbitrary, irrational, and in a sense provocative. It must not only be more or less unreasonable, it should, if possible, even openly *defy* reason. Indeed it may be totally irrelevant. If at the same time it is an act which defies morality, public or private, this may enhance its value. But that is not essential. It must at least be basically irrational. If it is completely useless and irrelevant, so much the better. And it must be dangerous, if not physically then at least socially or morally. The event brings one face to face with destruction or grave harm, if not danger to life and limb, then a danger to reputation, to one's social acceptability, one's future.

However, while the event may implicitly defy ostracism or hatred on the part of an out-group, it strengthens the bonds of the in-group, those who have agreed to engage in the symbolic and arbitrary activity together. At this point, we recognize characteristic adolescent behavior, but teenagers have no monopoly on it, except in so far as we are in

fact a teen-age society—a society that likes to play “chicken” not with fast cars, but with ballistic missiles.

The symbolic, irrational and perilous event must prove something, at least to those who perform it. The thing it attempts to prove must be some basic value in themselves: that they are *alive*, that they are *real*, that they *count*, or (as in the case of the authentic snake-handlers) that they are *the Chosen*. In fact, it is a *substitute for divine judgment*. Instead of waiting around in uncertainty, one forces the issue. One does something drastic and “conclusive.”

Naturally, not all who enact such events are necessarily believers. One does not have to believe in God—one merely needs to have an “image”! This mental ritual is a component in our contemporary idolatries.

Finally, and this is the point, those who have come together, who have agreed, who have performed the irrational, quasi-initiatory act, who have “proved themselves” thereby, who have stabilized their common image, *are now in a position to judge others*. By creating this situation of challenge, by constructing this “event,” they have proved themselves to be “the ones who are right.” They have not done this by thinking or reasoning, nor by discussion, dialogue, investigation: they have done it by a ritual and initiatory action in which they enjoyed the sense of self-transcendence, of escape from the monotony and the affront of a meaningless existence. And note that it is a cycle that is all the more easily set in motion when existence is in fact more really drab, when the mentality of the participants is more genuinely desperate, when the inner contradictions they seek to escape are all the more inexorable.

Though by its nature this event is arbitrary, unnecessary, and in some sense fabricated, if it is sufficiently drastic it can become far more than a pseudo-event. It can become an act of genuine horror. It can lead to incalculably tragic conse-

quences. If, in handling the rattlesnake around, somebody gets bitten, it is no longer a pseudo-event. Yet nevertheless, in its origin, the event was artificial, fabricated and indeed uncalled for.

Some examples: on the international level, a paradigm of snake-handling and pseudo-event was the Berlin crisis, turned on and off periodically, for the sake of effect. It reached its paroxysm in Cuba, and shortly after that Khrushchev's snake-handling days were over.

The big fuss about fallout shelters in this country was another episode of the same kind, and it was our reaction to the Berlin crisis. A purely symbolic and irrational exercise.

The philosophy of escalation, with its mystical degrees and esoteric meanings, is a form of intellectual snake-handling. To “think of the unthinkable” is to display one's prowess in handling a cosmic copperhead without dismay. Since the copperhead is only abstract at the time the feat is not uncomfortable. But in this area myths can suddenly and without warning turn into unpleasant realities. In point of fact, our snake-handling in South East Asia is not abstract—but, as I said before, I am not commenting on events.

On another level, we all participate in one way or another in this national or international snake-handling when we get into the act in some more or less dramatic way. A lot of our protests and demonstrations, even when they are perfectly valid and reasonable in themselves, take the form of political snake-handling. This, I submit, robs them of their real value, because it isolates our action and protest in a closed realm of images and idols which mean one thing to us and another to our adversaries. *We no longer communicate. We abandon communication in order to celebrate our own favorite group-myths in a ritual pseudo-event.* “News” is largely made up of this liturgy of pseudo-events and irrelevant witness. Let us realize that “Ideals” and “purity of

heart" may easily cover a snake-handling approach to political reality.

Everywhere, from extreme right to extreme left, we find people in our society who become "sanctified," set apart, chosen, sealed off in a ritual game of some sort by reason of events enacted in honor of images. They move step by step, taking the nation with them, into realms of commitment and of absurdity, areas where, by virtue of the fact that one has agreed to face some very select irrationality *one is quarantined from the ordinary world of right and wrong.*

The man who has agreed with his peers in the enactment of a symbolic, dangerous and arbitrary event has thereby put himself and them beyond good and evil. They have all entered together into the realm of the gods, and in that realm they find that their action has had amazing consequences: it changes the whole meaning of truth and falsity; it imposes on life an entirely new logic; one must follow on from one irrationality to the next in a demonic consistency dictated by machines.

But here of course, I am speaking of mental snake-handling only at the highest and most mystical echelons of the technological elite. Down on our pedestrian level there is no such mystical security, no such permanent election. We are not initiated into a whole new kingdom of sacred irresponsibilities. We have to repeat some crude fanatical stunt again and again because it never quite takes. However, we have the privilege of remotely participating in the snake-handling exploits of the high-priests of policy and strategy.

On this liturgy of pseudo-events the survival of the human race—or at least its sanity and dignity—are now made to depend.

Our salvation, on the contrary, cannot be sought in this realm of images and idols, of fabricated events and unclear meanings.

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After all this rambling and conjecturing, it is time to draw a few conclusions. Should the Church turn to the world of modern man and identify with him completely? In all his legitimate aspirations, in all his authentic human hopes and aspirations, obviously it must. If not it betrays him and betrays the Gospel. "Insofar as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) But the Church betrays herself and modern man if she simply identifies with his superstitions, his image-making, his political snake-handling and his idolatries of nation, party, class and race.

The Church has an obligation *not* to join in the incantation of political slogans and in the concoction of pseudo-events, *but to cut clear through the deviousness and ambiguity of both slogans and events by her simplicity and her love.*

"To be simple," says Bonhoeffer, "is to fix one's eye solely on the simple truth of God at a time when all concepts are being confused, distorted and turned upside-down. It is to be single-hearted and not a man of two souls . . . *Not fettered by principles but bound by love for God.* The simple man has been set free from the problems and conflicts of ethical decision."

It is unfortunately true that the Church has to repent of remaining enclosed in parochial concerns, and turn to the outside world. To turn to the world is to recognize our mission and service to man and man's world. We are not in the world for ourselves, for our own spiritual advantage, but for Christ and for the world. We have a mission to reconcile the world with Christ. How can we do this if we do not "turn to the world"? At the same time, in turning to our fellowman and loving him, we will ourselves be reconciled with Christ. What other point has there ever been in preaching the Gospel? Unfortunately the simple business of "making converts" has sometimes obscured all deep understand-

the fury of the world is not merely directed against our own ethical or political ideals, worse still our image of ourselves incarnated in our particular mode of symbolic protest.

When I began this letter I did not promise an answer, I only promised a question. Our own lifetime will not suffice to bring us close to the answer. But the root of the answer is the love of Christ and the ground is the sinful heart of sinful man as he really is—as we really are, you, and I, and our disconcerting neighbor.