

I am a Serious Romantic...Aren't You?

“The thought of what America would be like if the Classics had a wide circulation troubles my sleep...”

Ezra Pound, *Cantico del Sole*

Time to stop deprecating the most hopeful and promising strain of thought in our western tradition. Time to call yourself a Romantic and be proud!! You are in great company. From Jesus, who “fully realized the creative capacities in each person,” to the fictional Don Quixote; from Emerson and Thoreau to Whitman, Ginsberg and all the social movements I have loved, including 60’s counter-culture, deep ecology and New Age Spirituality. It is time for those of us who, like Emerson, place our trust in “that source, at once the essence of genius, of virtue and of life, which we call Spontaneity or Instinct...the primary wisdom as Intuition, whilst all later teachings are superficial.”

(Side note: This paean to the Romantic spirit in no way rejects science or rationality. However, it does affirm a conclusion that the modern world has reached the limits of exclusive reliance on scientific rationalism and that the way out of our civilization’s earth and community-destroying cul-de-sac is via the imagination.)

Six years ago this spring, as Orin and I made our way to Alba, Italy, via American Airlines, I found, with only one transatlantic flight in my history and that long ago, I was terrified of flying. In the airport, Orin had picked up a copy of Atlantic Monthly. He showed it to me as our plane was taking off, as I was attempting by act of will to dispel the flood of panic threatening to overwhelm me. The article that had attracted him, by a writer named Curtis White, was called *The Spirit of Disobedience*. Reading that essay, with its inspiring Delphic-like power, gave me something to hold onto as perhaps no reassurances could have. The ideas, so consonant with my own, yet so freshly and vividly expressed, reinforced my aliveness and gave me a reason to remain in my body when I most powerfully wanted to flee it!

Referring to Thoreau’s famous act of civil disobedience in protest of the war with Mexico, and also of his symbolic removal to Walden Pond, White writes: “For Thoreau, when the time was out of joint, when the state had failed its own idea of itself, he felt a necessity to remove himself from it, to refuse the social order, in spite of the personal price he would have to pay for the gesture...Thoreau’s disobedience is disobedience as refusal. *I won’t live in your world. I will live as if my gesture of refusing your world has destroyed it.*” Later, White writes, “He understood [his Walden exile] as the need to create a society – even if a society of one on the banks of a tiny Massachusetts pond – *which he could willingly join.*(italics mine)

Surely our own time, like Thoreau’s, is severely, perhaps irreparably out of joint. How are we to live at a moment when we might be justifiably, rather than (mostly) neurotically, as in the case of my fear of flying – terrified of what is coming? Do we shut down our imaginations entirely, give ourselves over completely to our many available distractions and addictions? *Not a Good Idea*, for imagination is precisely the golden thread leading us out of this dire and desperate mess.

Since so many of us draw inspiration from the tremendous beauty, and the transcendent power of Thoreau’s creative achievement (*Walden*), why don’t we take *his* way? That is,

his gesture of refusal was at the same time the creation of an *American* work of such beauty that we turn to it again and again to find affirmation and meaning. It *is* possible, he makes us realize, both to categorically refuse the social order that we cannot willingly join, and to create, to make things, and to live fully creatively, in the spirit of the world that is not yet.

This is the spirit in which the Café Domenico was begun 10 years ago this July, and in which the small non-profit, The Other Side, was founded 5 years later. Small actions in the larger scheme of things, but actions which have meant a lot to people in our local community, and even beyond. Frank Lentricchia, Utica College's most famous English graduate, a published author and professor at Duke University, whose Utica-based detective novel will be debuting soon, wrote this about the Café Domenico: "It is truly rare to find a Cafe that not only does first rate coffee and pastry, but does so inside a setting of artistically sophisticated taste and is so supportive, in addition, of literary efforts. Nothing like it here, in the Chapel Hill, Durham, and Raleigh area. The fact is that you don't find a Cafe Domenico in most of America's major metropolitan areas, either. Bravo for you!"

Frank's words (oxygen for my soul!) could equally apply to The Other Side. In supporting non-profit The Other Side, especially, one participates in a project specifically for the purpose of serving that imaginative realm whose source is "the essence of genius, of virtue and of life." Not that I would try to claim the reality always matches the vision. Not all of our programs reach the level of *monuments of [the soul's] magnificence!* But everything we do – and the reason we are able to do what few others in major cities apparently are doing – is premised in that Thoreau-like refusal that is at the same time "making eternity," that is, transcendence. This is the very premise of the space we provide for the Utica community. And of course, we are available to people from outside of Utica, as well, but our location here in the little old rust belt city is very deliberate and very much part of both the Romantic's refusal *and* the imaginative making of a world "we can willingly join." It is a most humble, board by board, nail by nail task of making and building.

Those of you who follow are work and/or attend any of our programs, know that we are nearly entirely supported by the community, though we receive some help from Hamilton College and the new York State Council for the Humanities, for which we are extremely grateful. It is likely we will pursue other grant opportunities in future. This letter is for the purpose of asking for your financial support, in any amount, for our ongoing project. People often make pledges in the amount of \$10 or \$20 per month, amounts affordable for many of us even in these increasingly strapped times. **Please consider** making a pledge to The Other Side. Mail to 17 Grant St., Utica NY 13501, c/o Kim Domenico. I personally keep a record of every amount received and will happily provide a receipt for your tax records. If you decide to make monthly or quarterly payments, that is fine. (Fair warning: Keeping track of when your next payment is due may fall upon you, due to our lack of paid staff!)