

John F. Kavanaugh

*Following Christ
in a
Consumer Society*

*The Spirituality of
Cultural Resistance*

25th ANNIVERSARY EDITION

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CHAPTER ONE

READING THE LIFE OF THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

Repeat. Do you read? Do you read? Are you in trouble? If you are in trouble, have you sought help? If you did, did help come? If it did, did you accept it? Are you out of trouble? What is the character of your consciousness? Are you conscious? Do you have a self? Do you know who you are? Do you know what you are doing? Do you love? Do you know how to love? Are you loved? Do you hate? Do you read me? Come back. Repeat. Come back. Come back. Come back.

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

The late Walker Percy, in his brilliant satire on American culture, aptly subtitled “The Last Self-Help Book,” concluded with this fantasy appeal from an extraterrestrial voice. It is addressed to a culture whose people have lost all sense of their interior lives. They are incapable of communicating with each other, even though they expend endless energy trying to communicate with other planets and chimpanzees. They are earnestly romantic about their entertainment and about material objects, but deadly suspicious and cynical about persons. They are assiduously productive and yet on the edge of self-destruction.

Percy's words are a call for a "return" to our human personhood, to relationship, to the admission of inadequacy, to love and transcendence. But the words of renewal and reform demand from our society the very attitudes that we most promptly suppress: the acknowledgment that something is wrong and the willingness to change. We are after all "a city shining on the mountain," a "thousand points of light," and a "beacon" to all the backward nations of the world. We have been told, from the beginning of the new century, that our enemies are "evil ones" who hate us not for what we do but for what we are and for how we live. How can there be any need for us to examine ourselves, to "come back," or to repent?

What is more, the "lostness" of our selves, of our personhood, is reinforced systematically throughout our cultural consciousness. No matter where we turn—to ourselves, to others or to society at large—we find personal reality overshadowed by the omnipresent immensity of objects, whether it is in producing them, buying them, amassing them, or relating to them.

The Consumer Society is a formation system: it forms us and our behavior. It is also an information system: it informs us as to our identity and as to the status of our world. Its influence is felt in every dimension of our lives, and each dimension echoes and mirrors the others. The individual's "lost self" is paralleled in the dissolution of mutuality and relationship. The personal and interpersonal breakdown is reflected in the social and economic worlds through a general socialized degradation of persons, through a flight from human vulnerability, especially found in marginal people, and through a channeling of human desire into the amassing of possessions.

If we turn to the texts of our cultural life, our books, our media, our magazines, our newspapers, our heroes and heroines, a troubling interpretation suggests itself: the "end of man" and the deconstructed personal self which has been trumpeted by postmodern thinkers is the philosophical world's expression of the consumerist way of life, wherein personhood disappears.

THE EMPTY INTERIOR

One man who knows Trump well does see a rhyme and reason. Trump is a brilliant dealmaker with almost no sense of his own emotions or his own identity, this man says. He is a kind of black hole in space, which cannot be filled no matter what Trump does. Looking toward the future, this associate foresees Trump building bigger and bigger projects in his attempts to fill the hole but finally ending, like Howard Hughes, a multi-billionaire living all alone in one room.

Time, January 16, 1989

In other words, we are what we eat, what we build, what we buy.

Advertisement for *Time*,
Advertising Age, July 22, 1985

Insofar as people have adopted the “American dream” of stuffing their pockets, they seem to that extent to be emptier of self and soul . . .

Our consumer culture persistently teaches that we can counter insecurity by buying our way to self-esteem and loveworthiness. The pervasive message, passed on in popular media, advertising and celebrity-modeling, is that we will feel better about ourselves if we are surrounded by symbols of worth.

Richard Ryan, foreword to Tim Kasser’s
The High Price of Materialism (2002)

Create a More Beautiful You. Tummy Tuck, Eyelid Lift, Breast Augmentation, Collagen Face Lift, Facial Resurfacing, Forehead Lift, Breast Lift, Nasal Surgery, Liposuction, Vein Treatment, Microdermabrasion, Botox
Plastic Surgery Advertisement,
Texas Monthly, January 2002

Donald Trump may be only the most prominent example of our quandary: the more we try to ground our identities in external possessions or triumphs, the more we plaster our names on everything we can accumulate, the more we cling to surface and style, the less we find underneath. We undergo what a *New York Times* Business Section article termed “The Strange Agony of Success.” Many of our most accomplished achievers and acquirers “tell their therapists that they have lost all sense of themselves, that they consider themselves frauds in their very success and that money has become the main symbol of their human worth.” As for Trump, although he slid into a \$900 million debt in the 1990s, by the turn of the century he was again “worth” more than a billion dollars. By 2004, he was the star of a “reality” show called *The Apprentice*, wherein aspiring executives compete to win his approval.

The consuming self, unmasked, reveals a terrible absence. There is no substance to our being, nothing there but the appearances, the “outside,” the “looking good,” which has become, as the ad says, “everything.” There is a hole underneath it all. It is a discovery frighteningly made in those moments of true solitude when we are no longer producing, consuming, marketing, or buying. The demise of the self takes place long before any death suffered by one’s own hand. It occurs when first the myth that we are nothing but “what we eat, what we build, what we buy” is lodged in our mind.

The fear of our human frailty, of our unguardedness, of our creaturely existence takes manifold expression in the consumer society. Underneath the differing examples is a hidden rejection of our very selves, our personal limits, our deficits of mind and body. It can be found in the depressed self-rejection that the young, especially women, experience. A Princeton study of the late 1980s found that one in four young teenage girls reported herself as being “extremely depressed.” Oddly, the more time they spend on shopping, hairstyling, and applying makeup, the more depressed they get.

Self-rejection inhabits and covertly motivates the addictive patterns of our lives: “He’s drinking himself to death.”

Or, with the rates now estimated at 400,000 deaths a year, “She’s smoking herself to death.” Television medicates our feelings, dulling our sensitivities, numbing our interior lives. Our average children will have 19,000 hours of TV by the end of high school, more time than they will spend in classrooms. The more depressed of the children tend to watch television in greater quantities. As the “rebelmothers” website reported, psychologists Allen Kanner and Tim Kasser in 1999 warned of advertisements that induce a sense of inadequacy in children unless they buy products, a dynamic that contributes to “the formation of a shallow ‘consumer identity’ obsessed with instant gratification and material wealth.”

The flight from the solitary personal self haunts our compulsion to work, our urgency to produce. We often seem incapable of living in the present moment while paradoxically we feel robbed of time. Professor Geoff Godbey of Pennsylvania State University observes that we have devised marvelous stratagems to save, borrow, manage, lose, beat, and kill time, but we avoid personally living in it. “In America, there’s a great need to define ourselves by what we do. We don’t see ourselves as born with a fixed identity, so what we do becomes a sign advertising who we are.”

The diversity of techniques for avoiding our interior feelings, the saturation of our consciousness with images, impulses, and noise, the avidity with which we feel we must produce, and the seriousness with which we invest our identity in money-making are all symptoms of a dispossessed and forgotten interior world.

THE BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

The '80s were about acquiring—acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I pay for a little more time with my family! What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends! It took a

deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul.

“Lee Atwater’s Last Campaign,” *Life*,
February 1991

Do your own thing. Seek your own bliss. Challenge authority. If it feels good, do it. Shun conformity. Don't force your values on others. Assert your personal rights (to own guns, sell pornography, do business free of regulations). Protect your privacy. Cut taxes and raise executive pay (personal income takes priority over the common good) . . . Such sentiments define the heart of economic and social individualism, which finds its peak expression in modern America.

David Myers, *The American Paradox*, 2000

There have been a lot of jokes made about the number of marriages that go on the rocks because people would rather sit in front of a computer terminal than spend time with their spouses, but it's no joke, says professor of psychology at the U.S. International University in San Diego, Michael Yapko. “People are having substitute relationships with their cars, computers, VCRs and bank accounts.”

“High Technology and the
Decline of Human Caring,”
Saint Louis Post-Dispatch, July 9, 1986

I got knocked up by half a cubic centimeter of defrosted sperm that had been FedExed in a nitrogen tank from an East Coast donor facility to my doctor in Los Angeles. Now, if all goes well, my dream will become a reality: I'll be a single mom . . . Without the emotional con-

text, finding a donor seemed less like the intimate act of choosing my child's father and more like buying a car. I could select a basic model (tall, good-looking, healthy) and then accessorize with options . . . Ordering the father of my child on a Web site was especially difficult for me, because I'm not a good online shopper.

Lori Gottlieb, "The XY Files,"
Atlantic Monthly, September 2005

Unable to engage our interior lives, we are incapable of engaging the interior lives of other people. Not knowing ourselves, we are unable to reveal who we are before the face of another person. And we are unable to receive them in their personhood since we are out of touch with our own.

The commodity-hucksters reassure us that their products will comfort us more than persons could, anyway. "I'm looking for a meaningful relationship, and I found it at Saks Fifth Avenue." "Toyota, I love what you do for me." "Fall in love without paying the price." "Loves having a trust fund, hates feeling guilty about it; hates, loves, hates, loves; wants a better relationship with money." Thus advertisements evangelize us.

As C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Four Loves*, if we want to avoid the pains and vulnerability of love, we had better not even love a cat. We should wrap our hearts in tinsel and trinkets, and they will never be broken; they will become unbreakable. Dead. Like the objects we cling to. And so human passion, which can only be fulfilled by encountering persons, is channeled into possessions. We are warned of the betrayals and vulnerabilities often discovered in relationships. We might be "found out" as we really are. We might be rejected and certainly wounded. This cautionary theme is the gist of a run-of-the-mill *Cosmopolitan* article of the 1980s. "As we've heard a boring number of times, a child is only lent. If you clutch a loved one too closely, that person might disappear . . . But there's no need to hold back when you're dealing with possessions. Clasp a sensuously soft cashmere as tightly as you like (assuming your fingernails are well cared for). It will never walk out on you."

The Consumer formation system trains us for a life of fragmented relatedness. According to Source Priority Management Systems, Inc., eighty-five percent of the business people in the U.S. work more than 45 hours a week. Eighty-one percent experience stress, forty-eight percent every day. Eighty-nine percent take work home with them. Sixty-five percent work more than one weekend a month. Forty-two percent don't read to their children. Fifty-three percent spend less than two hours a week looking after their children. As one man said to his wife, who was painfully wondering why they never spent time together or with the children, "Honey, it's not you. It's just that I don't know how not to work."

Relationships are also assaulted by the media culture—not only by the content of the media, which so often demeans committed intimacy, but by its almost imperial hold on us. When we are not producing and consuming, we watch. By 2004, 60 percent of children aged 8 to 16 had a TV in their bedroom. Half of American households have three or more televisions. We sit, passive again, like objects, lulled into the world of "it" which dominates our conscious action and labor. We look at images of images and fancy them real. Our life project seems to have become, in the words of Neil Postman, "Amusing Ourselves to Death." More of our conscious life is spent witnessing commercials than communicating with our spouses, children, community. Taking a cue from Orwell's 1984, Mark Crispin Miller has written, "Big Brother is You, watching." The Consumer formation system, through its media, speaks to our souls and utters its pronouncement: "We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves."

Kevin Roberts, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi, has discovered the secret of the empty soul, bereft of relationship. It is *Love-marks*, the title of his book and the message of "marketing" speeches he gives throughout the world. He has five insights into our commitments to favorite brand names: "Lovemarks capture emotion . . . Lovemarks are irreplaceable and irresistible . . . Lovemarks earn both love and respect . . . Love-

marks touch mystery, sensuality and intimacy . . . Best of all, we can *measure* Lovemarks.” The deepest desires of humanity can be measured because they are found, not in relationship with others, but in relationship to products.

The upshot of it all is this: the culture of lost interiority is paradoxically a culture of lost intimacy. Alone with our passive aloneness, but not in true solitude, we find that our ability to relate to other persons has atrophied. We know not how to give ourselves to the other since it is an empty fortress we call the self. And we know not how to receive the other’s love, since one cannot love what one does not know. The fragmentation of relatedness and intimacy is the hidden termite eating at the foundations of commitment to others. It is manifested in the breakdown of family life, in the increasing rate of divorce, in the abandonment of our children to the streets and the airwaves, in the decline of civic and neighborly community, in the growing popularity of “prenuptial” contracts made fashionable by the rich and famous, in the new malady called “time famine.”

In my own discussions with parents and their children concerning the problem of family stress and fragmentation, I know of no other force so pervasive, so strong, and so seductive as the consumer ideology of capitalism and its fascination for endless accumulation, extended working hours, the drumming up of novel need fulfillments, the theologizing of the mall, the touting of economic comparison, the craving for legitimacy through money and possessions, and unrelieved competition at every level of life.

Having expended our lives in the husbandry of commodities, we feel robbed of any time we might give each other. And we starve in the midst of plenty.

Thus the words of Lee Atwater, the campaign manager for the first President Bush, were prophetic. In his forties, dying of a brain tumor, painfully bloated from chemical medication, he speaks out from the pages of *Life* magazine to the people of the hard-driven consumer society. It is a “tumor of the soul.”

THE CRAVING FOR THINGS

The money society has expanded to fill the vacuum left after the institutions that embodied and nourished those values—community, religion, school, university, and especially family—sagged or collapsed or sometimes even self-destructed. Now we live in a world where all values are relative, equal, and therefore without authority, truly matters of style. Says Dee Hock, former chief of the Visa bank card operation: “It’s not that people value money more but that they value everything else so much less—not that they are more greedy, but that they have no other values to keep greed in check.” Or as University of Pennsylvania sociologist E.D. Baltzell puts it: “When there are no values, money counts.”

Myron Magnet, “The Money Society,”
Fortune, July 6, 1987

Now we may have reached the apogee of consumerism. Many of us can no longer afford what our fathers could—a house, an education for our children—but an enormous percentage of us can afford practically anything else, and we buy it. What is more, we have made the very act of pursuing it almost an end in itself. We have built pleasure domes of commerce dedicated to the search, great agglomerations of shops under one roof, climate controlled, adorned by trees and fountains that never see the sun, places where some people spend entire days, unashamed. In California the bumper stickers say, “I Shop, Therefore I Am.” Nowadays, this is only half a joke.

“The Gimme Generation,” 1980s supplement
to *Wall Street Journal*

The essential conservatism of Mr. Bush’s approach is all the clearer if you compare it with the big-government liberalism of the 1960s . . . Mr. Bush is not using

government to redistribute wealth (unless you own an oil company), to reward sloth or to coddle the poor. And government in America remains a shriveled thing by European standards. Some 40 years ago after the Great Society, America still has no national health insurance; it asks students to pay as much as \$40,000 for a university education; it gives mothers only a few weeks of maternity leave.

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge,
“Cheer Up, Conservatives,
You’re Still Winning,”
Wall Street Journal, June 21, 2005

Bereft of any interior life and starved for relationship, it is only logical that we feel driven to fill the emptiness that is within us and the absence that is between us.

A July 1987 cover story for *Fortune* magazine, entitled “The Money Society,” provided an extensive examination of the existential yearning at the heart of the consumer society. It begins with a religious allusion: “Money, Money, Money is the incantation of today. Bewitched by an epidemic of money enchantment, Americans in the Eighties wriggle in a St. Vitus’s dance of materialism . . . Under the blazing sun of money, all other values shine palely.” The liturgical and ritual context is apt. As the *Journal of Consumer Research* pointed out in June 1989, there is a confluence of “The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behavior.” While religion has become secularized, buying and consuming have become vehicles for experiencing the sacred. The infinite longing of the human heart has been introjected into products—the newest, the best, the costliest, the always interminably improved. Our malls are “cathedrals of consumption.” Eternity is found in Calvin Klein bottles. Infinity in a Japanese automobile. One’s heart, no longer a throne wherein the transcendent personal God might dwell, no longer engaged by a knowing and loving trinitarian encounter of other persons, is restless until it rests—now anchored or even chained by the promise of possessions.

Thus, accumulation is king. The *Fortune* article notes that we clamor for \$175 tennis shoes, \$40,000 fur coats, and a \$4,000 toy Mercedes. We are told that, while in 1967 forty percent of U.S. college freshmen thought “being well off” was important to them as opposed to eighty percent who thought “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was important, by the late 1980s the numbers had reversed. It was not so much that money and possessions were seen as being a value in one’s life; they were becoming the only value. And having more of them was becoming the only goal.

Many were succeeding. By 1990, millionaires numbered over 1.3 million people, six times as many as there were in 1970. The richest 1% of Americans, who owned 31.8% of the national wealth in 1963, had upped their share to an even heftier 34.4% of it two decades later. As Kevin Phillips revealed in *The Politics of the Rich and the Poor: Wealth and the American Electorate in the Reagan Aftermath*, the amassing of wealth in the United States was only beginning, and it was being redistributed away from the middle class and poor and into the hands of the super-rich. By the year 2005, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the number of millionaire households had risen to 7.5 million. *Forbes* listed almost 700 billionaires. It is noteworthy that even as the new century dawned, the top one percent of the population was getting a bigger share of after-tax income than the bottom 40 percent. The 2.8 million wealthiest Americans were earning more than the 110 million poorest. President Bush’s response was to push through tax cuts. An extended analysis in the Sunday, June 5, 2005 issue of the *New York Times* showed that these tax cuts benefited the very wealthiest (about 150,000 taxpayers) the most.

The craving for “more,” wedded with a powerful sense of isolated individualism, erodes our sense of solidarity. The doctrine of capitalist “freedom” is an appeal to supposedly “self-made” individuals who make and spend money in a society of unfettered celebration of private choice. The costs to the democratic civil community, however, are great. Former Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin has estimated that if the tax cuts of 2001 and 2003 for earners over \$200,000 were repealed and the re-

formed inheritance tax were continued rather than repealed in favor of the super-rich, any Social Security shortfall would be covered for 75 years. But our leadership has appealed to the dogma, “we know best how to spend our own money.” The problem, however, is this: is there any “we”?

Thus, conservatives are told to “cheer up” in a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece. “You’re still winning.” Sloth is not rewarded in America. Poor people are no longer coddled. Government is shriveled. America has no national health service. Universities cost \$40,000 a year for students to attend. Mothers have only a few weeks of maternity leave.

If this is “compassionate conservatism,” what on earth might “a culture of life” mean?

THE INJUSTICE OF DEPERSONALIZATION

American children watch an average of three to four hours of television daily. Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behavior. Unfortunately, much of today’s television programming is violent. Hundreds of studies of the effects of TV violence on children and teenagers have found that children may: become “immune” to the horror of violence, gradually accept violence as a way to solve problems, imitate the violence they observe on television, and identify with certain characters, victims and/or victimizers.

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, April 1999

“Threaten the Men in Your Office in a Whole New Way”

Advertisement for the Hummer, 2005

We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren’t punctilious

about locating and punishing only Hitler and his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war.

Ann Coulter, syndicated column on the
9/11 terrorists, September 13, 2001

Where can you get the idea that sexual violence against women is fun? From a music store, through Walkman earphones, from boom boxes blaring forth the rap lyrics of 2 Live Crew.

“To have her walkin funny we try to abuse it
A big stinking p—y can't do it all
So we try real hard just to bust the walls.”

That is, bust the walls of women's vaginas. 2 Live Crew's lyrics exult in busting women—almost always called bitches—in various ways, forcing anal sex, forcing women to lick feces. “He'll tear the p—y open 'cause it's satisfaction.' Suck my d—k, bitch, it makes you puke.” That's entertainment.

George Will, “America's Slide into the Sewer,”
Newsweek, July 30, 1990

The lost interior person, whose consuming and producing has become self-destructive, is capable only of injurious relationships. People are reduced to functions of their identity and gratification as consumers and possessors. Inevitably, this personal and interpersonal reality is “writ large,” Plato might say, in the republic, in society. The form it takes is systemic injustice—which is nothing other than reducing a human being to the status of a thing. Depersonalization in the individual and relational spheres is universalized in the social and political world.

Violence and violation haunt our media. Stylized mayhem ranging from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* to Saturday morning cartoons, the World Wrestling Entertainment and gangsta rap videos are complemented by saturation cable news coverage of murdered children, celebrity murders, molestations,

spousal homicide. In regular television programming, 61 percent of programs contain violent acts, with 44 percent of the incidents involving attractive perpetrators having no immediate punishment or long-range condemnation.

Sexual violence, so graphic and brutal that it cannot be described in the newspapers which defend it in the name of free speech, is commonplace in our cultural life. Over the last twenty years we were treated to the sadomasochistic videos and public appearances of Madonna and the male sexual modeling of Aerosmith's Steve Tyler, his pants falling off, his cheeks and lips seemingly swollen with silicone, his concession to change lyrics from "he raped," to "he popped." Robert Mapplethorpe's photographic exhibits were lionized as daring and challenging, even though he displayed men with whips in their rectums and sexual acts which were the primary occasion for the spread of AIDS. By the new century, mainstream sadomasochism was celebrated by a *Vogue* magazine article titled "Beyond Good and Evil." A curator of a museum of photography marvels at the influence of Helmut Newton: "Who could have predicted that the culture would follow his vision as if it were some sort of game plan for the future? That everybody would be wearing chains and stiletto heels as part of their daily dress and embrace S&M as a fashion statement?"

The denial of the human person's dignity and grace is evident as well in our geopolitics. A conservative columnist once recommended that we retaliate against Arab terrorists by striking Shiite villages and over-killing them at the ratio of 500 to 1. There was no outrage at such a proposal. He was not excommunicated from his church or laughed off the political scene. That is because his logic, for the most part, is accepted in our social world. An international policy which suggests that Arabs are expendable is echoed in the call-in talk shows where callers recommend that we "make an ash tray of all those Arab countries." Since the abomination of the destruction of the World Trade Center, forms of violence once considered unthinkable as American policy are now in effect (pre-emptive war) or under consideration (torture).

Under threat from the “evil ones,” some commentators revealed a new ferocity in their opinion. *Time* magazine ran a Lance Morrow piece, “Case for Rage and Retribution.” It was more than a rejection of any peaceful solution. It was a cause for a holy war of our own, filled with loathing not only for the terrorists, but also for those who cheered them on and had given them support. “America needs to relearn a lost discipline, self-confident relentlessness—and to learn why human nature has equipped us all with a weapon (abhorred in decent peacetime societies) called hatred.” Andrea Peyser in a *New York Post* column demanded that the United Nations “get the hell out of town” and characterized Christiane Amanpour as a “war slut.”

When a young Arab-looking man, having run from London police in the early days after the terror bombings in the summer of 2005, was killed instantly by five shots to the head, John Gibson in his July 22 Fox News segment “My Word” commented: “Five in the noggin is just fine. Don’t complain, ‘that’s barbaric.’ We are fighting barbarians.” The fact that the young man turned out to be a confused immigrant from South America is not the most troubling aspect of Gibson’s commentary. What is most distressing is that he continues the dehumanizing rhetoric that first surfaced after September 11, 2001, when he suggested that America imitate the methods of Syria’s Hafez Assad, who obliterated a Syrian town that harbored his enemies: “He shelled the town until everybody was either dead or gone and literally paved over it. It was cruel. It was heartless. It was merciless. It was unfair. But he didn’t have political problems with his opponents again. Works for them. So why is it so bad for us?”

Institutionally legitimated violence, whether it be reckless retaliation against enemies, capital punishment, racism, the astounding abortion rates or the growing euthanasia movement, can only occur when a culture has lost any sense of intrinsic personal dignity. Some “cause,” some heartfelt goal, some desirable result justifies wiping out persons. Yet it seems impossible for us to ask ourselves: if “national interest,” personal happiness, or freedom justifies any action, do those

same goals justify the action of “the enemy”? We do not have to go so far as apply the logic to Islamic extremists. Timothy McVeigh, an extremist for what he thought was the cause of American freedom and patriotism, chose to kill hundreds because he needed a “body count” to make his stand against *tyranny*. Wearing his favorite T-shirt, *sic semper tyrannis*, on the day of his Oklahoma City bombing, he would never regret the act. “In any kind of military action, you try to keep collateral damage to a minimum. But a certain amount of collateral damage is inevitable.”

Consumer culture, of course, is not the cause of violence and depersonalization. One need only reflect on Maoism, Pol Pot, Rwanda and Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. The challenge for people living in a consumer society like our own is to question the unique ways that capitalism generates its own forms of injustice and violence against persons.

When consumerism becomes a full-blown philosophy and way of life, all social depersonalization, whether in violence or degradation, carries a common theme. Women and men are reduced to the status of means and instruments, whether it be for profit, for “enlightened” self or national interest, or for pleasure. Though almost half a million people die from diseases related to smoking, we continue to subsidize the tobacco industry. Though we are witnessing a frightening creation of an unrooted and uncared-for “underclass,” we spend our money on arms and refuse further taxes. Though we say that “nothing is ever solved by violence,” we embark upon a war, the consequences of which are horrific, in the name of preserving “our way of life.”

THE FLIGHT FROM THE WOUNDED

My real undoing came a few weeks later. The subject was *binding moral duties*. We find such duties compelling; they significantly affect the way we act, I claimed. For instance, “I would like to go to a movie, but *ought* to visit a friend in the hospital . . .” These

statements show the tension between what we find pleasurable and what we experience as a moral commitment. It *feels different* to enjoy a movie than to do what is right, even—or especially—when the hospital is far away, the visit is tedious and being there reminds us of our own vulnerability. Most students didn't accept this line of reasoning . . .

I clearly had not found a way to help classes full of MBAs see that there is more to life than money, power, fame and self-interest.

Amitai Etzioni, "Money, Power and Fame,"
Newsweek, September 18, 1989

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. has launched a war on global terrorism, but it has neglected the deeper causes of global instability. The nearly \$500 billion that the U.S. will spend this year on the military will never buy lasting peace if the U.S. continues to spend only one-thirtieth of that, around \$16 billion, to address the plight of the poorest of the poor . . . just 15 cents on every \$100 of our national income. The share devoted to helping the poor has declined for decades and is a tiny fraction of what the U.S. has repeatedly promised, and failed, to give.

Jeff Sachs, "The End of Poverty,"
Time, March 14, 2005

Needless to say, the real market here is not the pets themselves but their owners, who spent more than \$34 billion last year on [them] . . . according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. (The 2005 "trend report" on the trade group's Web site notes a surge of companies getting involved in "pet attire" and claims that faux mink coats and monogrammed sweaters are among the offerings.) Perhaps pet lovers can be accused of treating their an-

imals as mere props to be decorated as broad extensions of their owners.

Rob Walker, "Dog Chic,"
New York Times Magazine, August 7, 2005

Things are not woundable. They do not bleed or suffer or die. And the culture that enthrones things, products, objects as its most cherished realities is ultimately a culture in flight from the vulnerability of the human person. It is the unguardedness of personal existence which is fled when we escape from interiority, or evade committed intimacy, or harden our hearts to the unjust degradation of people.

Amitai Etzioni, while serving as visiting professor at Harvard Business School, was puzzled by his students, whose prime conviction was "consumer sovereignty." The poor do not exist for them, and even if the poor should be present in the form of a friend sick in a hospital, there is no imagined response of duty or compassion. They responded to his case of visiting a friend rather than going to a movie with the claims that he would be just trying to get rewarded by the friend, that he was trying to impress his other friends, that he wanted to make himself feel good. They were "boiling down whatever is noble in human behavior to base motives (self interest, the quest for reputation, or simply whatever is fun), denying the existence of morality, and, in the process, undercutting its significance."

Such a response is actually a further withdrawal from the personal dimension of life, from responsiveness and responsibility, from compassion and empathy, from a recognition of human fragility. Robert Reich, a political economist from Harvard, characterized it as the "Secession of the Successful" in his early 1991 article for the *New York Times Magazine*. Successful Americans are holding themselves off in psychological and economic enclaves where they do not have to confront the wounds of humanity or the world.

The distractions, entertainments, and "stuff" of our lives allow us to live not only apart from wounded humanity but also

in a world of illusion. Many Americans, thinking we are the most generous people in the world, believe that we already give too much to the poor nations; and yet we spend on our pets more than double the amount we give to the six billion poor persons in the world, 20,000 of whom die, each day, from the effects of extreme poverty. Facts such as these prompt skepticism from the rest of the world when U.S. government officials cite “humanitarian” reasons for invading Iraq when millions were killed in Rwanda and starved in Niger.

As for “private” giving, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy* reports that Americans making over \$70,000 give 3.3 percent of earnings to charity. (The percentage of gifts goes up as income goes down: those making between 30 and 50 thousand dollars contribute close to 9 percent.) The Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, moreover, estimates that the estate tax rollback will cost charities \$10 billion a year.

Our flight from the wounds of the world’s poor is mirrored in our private difficulties in accepting our own vulnerability as embodied persons. There is a mounting ideological delusion that humans at the margins of life surely do not count as persons like the rest of us. We are productive. We manage our lives. We take care of ourselves. We are independent, free, and in control. Thus we are led to question whether we have any personal community with humans in their most unmanageable, vulnerable, and dependent stages of life. Surely mute fetuses, dependent infants, and diapered or dysfunctional old people are not “full persons” like the rest of us. This observation may be shocking to some readers but not to those who use terms like “blobs of protoplasm,” “vegetables,” and “heart-beating cadavers.”

Our antidote, again, is what we most fear: the shedding of the armor (which has become our cage); the opening of our eyes to the wounded (whose existence we deny); the touching of our hearts by those for whom the consumer dream is at best a false promise, at worst a proven nightmare.

The marginal. The sick. The dying. The poor. The old. They might teach us. But we deny our need for learning.

One of the stories of the Buddha might best express the paradox. He was young and wealthy and depressed. His parents gave him everything and shielded him from anything which might distress him. They even had the inside windows of his carriage painted with lovely pictures so that he might not see the pain of the world around him.

Then, one day, being carried through his kingdom, he opened the windows and saw the “Four Sights,” though at first he was not even able to name what he saw. He saw people: looking for food, mourning a loss, caring for the ill, facing their old age. His driver told him the names of the sights.

And Buddha left his kingdom. His journey led him to the Bo Tree where he experienced his enlightenment. He would become a Buddha for others.

And wherever you go in the Far East or around the world, you find the statue of the Buddha. And he is smiling. Enlightened by human vulnerability, he is no longer depressed.

Could we take the story of the Buddha as our own? Might it be that the people of the “joyless economy” will be best enlightened when they open their hearts—experientially—to the marginal of their society?

It is our refusal to hear the cry of the poor and wounded which is the final component of our systemic alienation from personal existence. Walker Percy’s voice from the wilderness that we “return” to ourselves and “come back” to our human personhood will demand not only a rediscovered interior life, a renewal of interpersonal relationships, a reawakening to the joys of simplicity, and a rediscovery of our passion for justice. It will also require a reopening of our hearts to the marginal people of our world.

The problems that we face are interwoven, since the consumer society and its values are the fabric of our lives. Connecting all of the parts of our experience with a hollow texture of meaning and purpose, consumerism becomes a thing of huge significance, a religion, in effect, supported by its own philosophy and leading to its own theory of behavior. This insight will help us understand the deformation of personal life

that has taken place, even in our ways of knowing, willing, and acting. What is more, it will help us see that, once having encountered the life of Christ and his redemption of people, every one of which has a unique personal existence, any response we might make must be a total one, informing not only our private and interpersonal lives, but our social, political, and economic worlds.