

Is He the Purpose?

— By Jim Sleeper —

*Behold the day is coming, saith the Lord,
When I will send a famine upon the land;
It will not be a famine of bread and water,
But of hearing the word of God.*

*And men shall wander to and fro,
From sea to sea,
From north to south,
From the west even unto the east,
Seeking the word of God,
But they shall not find it.*

*In that day, fair maidens and young men
Shall faint and fall, dying of the thirst;
They shall fall, never to rise again.*

—Amos



Himself

Vicki Lawrence

The curse certainly seems to have been cast on us; the youth of America are fainting, some would say, and we live in times such as those of the Old Testament prophets. At least when seven thousand young Americans gather to receive perfect knowledge from an Indian adolescent, even the skeptics must admit there is some real thirst, some kind of spiritual exhaustion; and the contrast of the gentle, liquid, bobbing human kaleidoscope against the Prudential Center's mighty

structures conjures up vivid images of Jerusalem in the times of Amos and Jesus, or of Rome in the fifth century — times of great imperial power and of popular restlessness and emotional collapse.

Granted that for many the guru's Hynes Auditorium appearance was an evening's free entertainment, a curiosity, still it seems that for many others the Maharaj-Ji's claim that "Just imagine, I have a following of six million people; whatever I tell them to do, they would be most pleased to do it", is quite potentially true.

Those of us movement veterans who like to have our spiritual needs more integrated with something like freedom of choice and political potency must wonder what we did to deserve this phenomenon. We failed to ask ourselves some deep questions about our needs for faith and for emotional sustenance — things we are all past masters at doing without, things those young teenagers at anti-war rallies on the Boston Common were looking for and which the movement somehow did not provide in as lasting a way as they had hoped it would.

"We could be hijacking planes and stealing cars and killing people," says the guru of his following, "but instead we have realized this perfect knowledge, and our movement is completely different." Yet it is the complete, releasing loyalty of young people so long denied any believable focus of faith that seems so ominous, like any healthy need dammed up, held back, until it must find an outlet, a safe, uncomplicated receptacle, at any price.

We still do need to believe in things — in people, in communities — and it seems that beneath the stridency of our late sixties rhetoric there was more pain and hurt than we were willing to admit — pain about not having such things to believe in. Years ago, when I began to withdraw my faith in America, my father would say, "Look, this country has been good to me", in an almost pleading tone; he would talk about the Russian cossacks, the slaughter of our European relatives, the poverty and illiteracy, and now, in contrast, about the life I was able to lead; only my grandfather's move to America stood between my present hopeful struggle and the mass graves of World War II.

Somehow I had never been able to refute him, and there will always be a piece of me, too, which remembers my red baseball cap and my childhood and adolescent love of this country. I haven't really admitted that in years. Finally,

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His Value

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with even my father hurting deeply about America, I can admit it for both of us: "America" once held our trust. We are hurting because we wanted to believe, we really, really did, and we were betrayed.

But the kids I've worked with more recently in the suburbs, the high school seniors and recent graduates who comprised almost half of Saturday night's crowd, never even got off the ground on that kind of faith. Kennedy was assassinated while they were in second grade. Their introduction to political consciousness, during Junior High, was the 1968 Chicago Convention. Scratch one arena, and at a time of life when for various reasons, the need to be faithful can be pretty damned important.

There is another lesson I've had to learn, about emotional starvation. As one of the "older Americans" who once believed, I got to read de Tocqueville and Fromm and others who warned that the greatest danger to a free society is when people grow weary of the ambiguity and difficult decision-making that comes with freedom, and long to surrender the burden of making complex choices about more and more areas of life. We seem to have an economic and political system that has a stake in making us weary, in breaking up communities of trust, playing upon our fears, removing the ego strength that would allow us to resist turning to consumption for warmth or becoming cannon fodder for honor. In Weimar Germany, just before Hitler, the same thing happened: youth culture took to the hills and read Hesse, while older folks lived as high as they could in fashionable Berlin. If what I've had drummed into me was correct, that was a kind of surrendering based on emotional starvation, a softening-up process, the release of a need which only a Fuehrer could satisfy as the society's more humble and homey arenas of trust broke apart under the pressures of corporate greed.

And there is the old Hebrew in me, who has heard Amos, who has seen messiahs come and go. Long before I could understand what it meant, I had coded into my mental rhythms the textbook phrase which popped up again and again in religious school: "People were defeated, weary in spirit, disillusioned, and they followed after false messiahs who sprung

up like weeds in the field." I can hardly believe I was learning about that during the mid-fifties, when the closest thing we had to a leader was Eisenhower, and when my contemporaries and I were too young to remember McCarthy or anything else.

And I remember cool August evenings at summer camps in the early sixties, when we used to sing the civil rights songs, yet were reminded at the same time by the young guitar-playing rabbis who had been to Selma that you always have to have a longer view, a spiritual base, because movements, alas, come and go, and you've got to have something more rooted to fall back on. Sure enough, I was to realize in later years that the movement would have gotten nowhere without people who had that base; consider King, Coffin, Dellinger, Berrigan. Those who tried to believe in the movement alone, like Rennie Davis, were bound to be burned.

So I am seeing a lot of things confirmed these days. And if that makes me look askance at a 15 year old Indian presiding over a multi-million dollar business which plays upon those needs and yearnings through a careful reading of the youth market, it does *not* make me belittle the needs themselves, the pain, the emotional starvation, the almost crushing need for a release of loyalty, which are brought to him. For the fact is that our oppressions are no longer as easy to target as Watergate or the draft, they are what I was always told they were: more subtle, closer to home and to matters of spirit, rooted in deep human needs whose denial gives rise to Vietnams and Watergates and to gurus and saviors as well. Chicanos may be starved and blacks beaten, but the way the system gets to those of us who are supposed to *manage* it is by fucking over our emotional needs.

The loneliness, privatism, egotism, consumerism and careerism in which we were raised are *our* carefully coddled oppressions, and it is these which our young bring to gurus for relief.

The pain of infant love lost on mothers too busy becoming American dream queens; the pain of fathers wrenching themselves "successfully" from the blackbread bowels of peasant Europe only to find a cool, crisp funeral in a plastic chapel half-empty with acquaintances; the pain of childhood trust lavished upon sunny all-American Saturday mornings of streetside auto-repair and sandlot softball, now betrayed in the oppression of machines and competition; the pain of

school success become a "fix" we need increasing doses of to feel okay; the pain of a hundred psychosomatic ailments which merge together like a great lament for the aching spiritual and emotional and erotic wealth which haunts a million sleepless nights and drugs itself into insensibility daily in a thousand classrooms and offices; the pain of friendships gone awry, the pain of rejecting some while being rejected by others — these are the symptoms of our oppressions, and we have learned only too well how to live with them — or so I thought, until I saw the gathering last Saturday night at Hynes Auditorium.

In fact, when people surrender themselves to a "perfect master", my guess is that their emotional needs are not being met in daily life, face to face, with lovers and friends, and that they've given up believing that ordinary folks can be happy taking control of their own homes and workplaces together. Another guess is that the social emptiness which feeds this despair grows from corporate and economic demands, and from the havoc that the consumerism and warmaking of some very real and powerful vested interests is wreaking upon our lives.

One of the greatest hoaxes perpetrated upon us is the claim that loneliness and despair are "personal" problems, amenable to complete solution by therapy or divine light alone. Those powerful vested interests would be happy to have us believe that, and so it is not difficult for a Mercedes-riding Maharaj-Ji to rent Hynes auditorium when he's got a saleable product which turns attention away from the *social* causes of personal pain. Indeed, real religious teaching or therapy (and there *are* such things) might help to bring forth free people who could band strongly together to face common oppressions, as Daniel Berrigan, for example, would urge.

If what I had seen Saturday night was a strength of spirit, an openness of folks I could dance and laugh with and hold, people I could plan with and feel solidarity with in the face of forces which continue to wipe out our younger sisters and brothers in the suburbs, I might have something to say for Guru Maharaj-Ji.

But I saw no such strong and supple weaving of the spirit into flesh-and-blood communities of struggle and love. That's understandable; we were never taught how to build such things. Put the old American and the old Jew in me together, and I can smell Weimar Germany and fifth century Rome a country-mile away.