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# Blissful Degradation

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## Blissful Degradation

*Jonathan Place*

(2/14/94) Would like to say the words, blissful degradation before I forget them. They have been embedded while spending some time on 3rd and 11th Street in Manhattan. Got on the train from New Rochelle yesterday to Grand Central - from Grand Central to Astor Place, Greenwich Village. Grand Central subway rather frightening - homeless folks, helpless man sprawled out in the hallway, his feet in a twisted and dangling formation out to his side. He held his palm face up in the air - about a foot off the floor, like a child checking for rain. His eyes a ghostly and glazing white drifting into the opposite wall - focusing in and out upon you. He's talking to somebody, maybe himself - a lot of slur and mumble - anger and detachment in his voice. What brought him here?

Went to the lower station - the surroundings drove my head and eyes down into the floor; I feared what I saw. Extremes of attitudes - there were those most comfortable, those most powerful and intimidating, and a nervous man with the flaps of his hat pulled snugly to his collar bones, his hands shoved hard between his knees. His shoulders scrunched up towards his ears - squeezing his neck out of sight. His eyes danced and darted with uncertainty. His lips shivered silently with insecurity. But how loud was that voice screaming inside his head?

On the subway car, a black man lying on the floor as another man dressed in Authority, wearing a badge named Security comes and yells and screams at him to get his ass up. He threatens with handcuffs. The tired man mumbles in his sleep. All else pay no attention - casting an indifference upon him. People step over him, people talk through their little conversations with their friends. Others sit in silence, thinking. An indifference, a seeming lack of care or concern. At least nobody expresses their concern. Another homeless on the car gives the man a nudge to make sure he's alright - to make sure he's still alive. The sleeping man responds to the nudge. The concerned man says O.K., nods, and walks on. The only one to take the time - the only one to express a sincere concern for the tired man's welfare. The sign outside Grand Central says, "Do Not Give Money to People." Reminds me of the zoo, a sign one would see in the zoo, "Do Not Feed the Animals." But these are human beings in here, fenced in and caged up. But the cage is so well hidden, we do not see what it is that keeps them down. We do not see what it is that bars them to the streets as we walk by, daring not to look into their eyes, daring not to wonder, daring to ignore, daring to toss them a dime. For whose gain has the cage been erected? Who or what has driven these people

into the cement streets? Why is the cage so well hidden?

In the Village there are measures to create a distracting happiness - objects to bring pleasure to the mind, and a holiday from conscience - only pleasure - happiness is the priority here - drugs, rice wine, pornos, music, and dance . . . I look outside the window and into the "Village Voice" to see phone lines, theatre, and music. Let's spend our money here, it will be fun. We'll have such a good time. . .

The Limelight used to be a church, stained glass and vaulted ceilings - an impressive sight with stained glass and multicolored rooms. Lazars shooting overhead with a tall and beautiful woman dancing in a suspended cage - she's very graceful and seductive with her underwear as an outerwear. Another's white pants hug her hips tightly as they hang loosely from her legs. All walks of life at the party, drinking and smoking; dancing and dancing to the synthesized music. It is 2 a.m. and a man on a drum is banging away with his palms, hard and striking. Men and women all around - a timely, blissful scene. Everybody is having fun - concentrating on the joys of the night, not concentrating at all - but moving and feeling good. How about the man in Grand Central hallway, how about the tired man on the subway floor? No it is not him people choose to see, dying in his suspended cage. We give our money and attention to a dancing figure instead. We spend our time with her because she is not real, she is for our fantasies, only for our imagination is she, suspended above and out of reach. But this man, we can get close to him, close enough to touch, we can hug him if we want, we can smell his breath, see into his eyes, and hear him breathe. But the man on the street disturbs us, even repulses us, so we look and look and look away. Yes how about them - signs of problem.

For simplicity's sake we could call it overpopulation. Right, there are too many people alive today, that's overpopulation, that's the problem? Right? Yeah. Too many people living? Is a problem? Not enough dead? Right? Yeah! Or no, it's survival of the fittest, it's every man for himself, right? That explains it, doesn't it, the strong survive and the weak . . . well what good are they anyways, they can't even help themselves. That's it, we'll let them die.

Shall they be rescued from what's creeping into their gaze? I search for the answer, but none can be found. I hear myself blame the intangible "them." I hear people blame the victims. I hear myself blaming the other. And everyone seems to have an explanation, everyone has a name to call; they're "beggars" or "bums" or they're "addicts" or they're "manipulators" or they're "liars." It seems that we all have explanations and answers to put the problem to rest in our own minds, but not out there. The problem is still there. And I may ease my conscience and from guilt and responsibility with theories and scientific reasoning of social thought. But that is no answer. That does not ease any of the pain, that does not feed any mouths nor clothe any bodies, nor find home. Maybe if we pointed our fingers at ourselves, if we just looked at ourselves for once. Quieted our restless thoughts and listened to something else for a change. For once not run and try to

escape. Listen to the beat of your own heart for it is no different than the beat of any other. That is all I know. I guess that's what I need to tell myself.