

# Connected Learning in a Time of Confinement

Week 11: Revolution and Renewal

June 15, 2020

This anthology has been prepared in draft form for use in a special seminar curriculum and are provided for private, non-commercial use in extraordinary times. Additional information about the seminar and this volume is available from The Aspen Institute, 2300 N Street NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20037.

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## Other resources,

including daily meditations, periodic podcasts, on-line seminars and discussions, and occasional on-line conversations about this week's curriculum, are available at:

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# How to Use this Curriculum

**Connected Learning in Times of Confinement is designed to support people and their families, neighborhoods, organizations, and networks by building upon the Aspen Institute's unique expertise in facilitating meaningful conversations in a seminar setting.**

We envisage a weekly curriculum that can be used in pieces, or all at once, or in various combinations. Our hope is that these readings and guidance will allow you and others to reflect on fundamental human questions in ways that nourish our hearts, minds, and fellowship in a time of confinement. A curriculum (from the Latin *currere*, to run) is a path, an exploration, not something to be mastered but an invitation to discovery and wonder. These materials are curated to intrigue and delight you, and we invite you to reflect upon them on your own, and to share them—with family, friends, neighbors, teams, networks. In this, the journey itself is the destination, a call to thought, dialogue, and action.

**In a journey it is often helpful to have a guide, and in this curriculum you will find three guides:**

**First, the authors themselves—**

we do not need to follow the authors, but we do well to understand what they are saying;

**Second, guiding questions—**

for each reading, there is a set of guiding questions designed for individual and collective reflection; they are not the only (or even most important) questions, but a way of getting started; these may be found at the back of the packet and are best read after you have read the texts;

**Third, general guidance—**

for each discussion, participants and discussion leaders may want to remind themselves of some best practices; these may be found at the back of this packet.

We invite you to share these readings widely and encourage others to engage in conversation. As you do so, know that fellow seminar graduates and their families, friends, and colleagues are doing the same. We all contribute to a global chorus of conversation about ideas worth sharing and acting upon.

**—Todd Breyfogle, PhD  
Managing Director, Aspen  
Executive Leadership Seminars**

## About Aspen Institute Seminars

The Aspen Institute Executive Leadership Seminars Department drives change through reflection, dialogue, and action in service of a more free, just, and equitable society. We do this by: curating brave spaces of shared meaning which help people become more self-aware, more self-correcting, and more self-fulfilling; deepening participants' humane sensibilities and capacities for moral judgment through an examination of the humanistic traditions; establishing meaningful connections among diverse people and organizations in service of a better society.

For more information, including information about customized programs for companies and other organizations, please contact Kalissa Hendrickson, PhD, Director, at [Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspensinst.org](mailto:Kalissa.Hendrickson@aspensinst.org) or 202-736-3586. [Learn more.](#)

# Philosophical Basis

The Aspen Institute starts from an act of faith in the humanistic tradition: one must be reflective in order to insure that all human activity – political, scientific, economic, intellectual or artistic – will serve the needs of human beings and enrich and deepen their lives.

The Institute believes in the value both of the “Great Ideas” of the past as well as the importance of the sometimes inelegant and highly controversial ideas of the present.

The Institute is dedicated to the fundamental educational value of dialogue for mature men and women from different nations and cultures -- intercommunications between people of comparable competence from various backgrounds and specialized fields of experience.

The Aspen idea recognizes that the processes by which persons learn and develop or change their ideas are not mechanical or even purely rational. As there is a mystery at the edge of human thought, so there is a magic about human relationships, and the magic we attempt to invoke in Aspen is that of the sheer beauty of this area of the Rocky Mountains.

With Erasmus, we hold that “nothing human is alien” to the inquiring purposes of the Aspen Institute. The Institute intends to be, in sum, a place of excellence and excitement where men and women of the finest qualities of mind and spirit from all walks of life in the United States and abroad can meet to learn from one another through serious discussion of and work on significant problems facing society and the greatest ideas which have been expressed throughout history and today concerning these problems.

—J. E. Slater, President, The Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies, 1972

**Connected Learning in  
a Time of Confinement**

# Readings | Week 11

- 5 Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*
- 9 Yasmine El Rashidi, "Cairo, City in Waiting"
- 13 Elizabeth Kolbert, "Welcome to the Anthropocene"
- 17 Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"

# Exodus and Revolution

by Michael Walzer  
(1935–)

1 In a poem dedicated to Joseph Brodsky, playing on the story of the biblical  
Joseph, Anthony Hecht has a lovely line about “Egypt ... that old school of the  
soul.”<sup>1</sup> The idea of Egypt as a school, or at least a kind of training ground, is  
fairly common in the Exodus literature. Alternatively, Egypt is a furnace, the “iron  
5 furnace” of Deuteronomy 4:20, which the rabbis explain as a cauldron for refining  
precious metals: what emerges, presumably, is pure gold. This is an optimistic  
view of the effects of oppression on ordinary men and women. Many years later,  
Savonarola took the same view, expounding the text “But the more they afflicted  
them, the more they multiplied and grew” (Exod. 1:12)—and thinking, I suppose,  
10 of the Florentine people under the rule of the Medicis. The Israelites, Savonarola  
explained, multiplied in numbers and grew in spirit. He went on in his next  
sermon to talk enthusiastically about Moses’ killing of the Egyptian taskmaster,  
an example of spiritedness, certainly, but not of a spiritedness bred by affliction.<sup>2</sup>  
For Moses had grown up in Pharaoh’s court and never worked with brick and  
15 mortar (he had probably never worked at all). We can find a more realistic account  
of what was learned in “that old school of the soul” in a rabbinic interpretation of  
the killing of the taskmaster. Recall the text:

20 And it came to pass ... when Moses was grown, that he went out  
unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he spied an  
Egyptian smiting an Hebrew, one of his brethren. And he looked  
this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man,  
25 he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. (Exod. 2:11-12)

We might think that Moses simply wanted to make sure that he was not  
seen; killing a taskmaster would be a serious crime in the house of bondage. But  
the prophet Isaiah takes a different view in a description of divine justice that  
30 obviously echoes the Exodus text. Isaiah imagines God looking down on the evil  
in the world and on the sins of Israel and waiting for, looking for, some human  
response:

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From Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (Basic Books, 1985) pp. 43-46, 149.

1           And he saw that there was no man, and he wondered that  
there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation  
unto [Israel]; and his righteousness, it sustained him. (59:16)

5           Building on these lines, some of the rabbis argued that when Moses looked this  
way and that way, he was looking for an Israelite ready to intercede and defend  
the beaten slave; he was looking for a real man, a proud and rebellious spirit.  
And when he saw no sign of resistance, when he saw, according to a midrashic  
10 commentator, "that there was no one ready to champion the cause of the Holy One  
Blessed be He," he acted himself, hoping to arouse his people and to "straighten  
their backs." This interpretation is the source, we are told, of the maxim attributed  
to Hillel: "Where there is no man, try to be one."<sup>3</sup> (I should note that the word  
"man" is used here in the generic sense, for among the few men in the Exodus  
15 story are two women, the midwives of Exodus 1, who refuse Pharaoh's order to  
kill the newborn sons of the Israelites.)

          What the bulk of the slaves learned in Egypt was servitude and slavishness.  
They learned, as I argued in the last chapter, to imitate their masters, but only at a  
distance, in their longings, fearfully; they admitted into their souls the degradation  
20 of slavery. This is a possible meaning of the line, "there was no man," and it is  
one of the major themes of the Exodus story and of the early and late interpretive  
literature. I shall work through a few characteristic passages before coming to  
the key passage, Exodus 32, the story of the golden calf. I want to suggest that  
there exists in the text an argument about the moral and psychological effects of  
25 oppression. The argument is remarkably like that of Stanley Elkins, in his well-  
known and highly controversial book about slavery in the American South.<sup>4</sup>  
Indeed, Elkins would have done well to cite the Exodus rather than relying for  
his comparative material on the more extreme case of the Holocaust: for the South  
was more like a house of bondage than a death camp. There is, in any case, a long  
30 history of citation in which the slavishness of the Israelites is used to explain, first,  
the forty years of wandering in the desert and the reiterated attempts to return to  
Egypt and then, later on, the difficulties of revolutionary or liberationist politics.

          I will begin with a story that has only the skimpiest of textual foundations, but  
that provides insight nonetheless into the realities of Exodus politics. When God,  
35 speaking out of the burning bush, commands Moses to return to Egypt, He tells him  
to gather the elders of Israel and go with them to confront Pharaoh (Exod. 3:18). And  
Moses and Aaron do gather the elders and tell them of the coming deliverance. But  
when they speak to Pharaoh, they appear to be alone: "And afterward Moses and  
Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Let my people  
40 go..." (Exod. 5:1). What happened to the elders? This is the midrashic account:

Our rabbis said: the elders went along at the beginning but stealthily  
slipped away, one by one, two by two, and disappeared. By the time



1 [Moses and Aaron] reached Pharaoh's palace, not one of them remained.  
This is witnessed by the text, "And afterward Moses and Aaron went in." But  
where were the elders? They had slipped away.<sup>5</sup>

5 They slipped away, says Rashi, "because they were afraid."<sup>6</sup> These words  
are probably meant to recall Exodus 14:10, where the Israelites find themselves  
trapped between the Egyptian army and the sea: "And when Pharaoh drew nigh,  
the children of Israel lifted up their eyes and, behold, the Egyptians marched after  
10 them, and they were sore afraid .... "As the elders, so the people as a whole: all  
the Israelites were afraid of their masters, unwilling to challenge Pharaoh in his  
palace, overawed by the sight of his army. According to the biblical account, there  
were six hundred thousand men in the Israelite tribes that marched out of Egypt.  
Why should such a large number, asks the medieval commentator Abraham  
15 Ibn Ezra, stand in fear of their lives? Why didn't they turn and fight? They were  
psychologically incapable, he says; they suffered from a slave mentality; for  
centuries they had not defended themselves-not, at least, by fighting.<sup>7</sup> Indeed,  
they were the very opposite of spirited men....

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us,  
20 powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The "door of  
hope" is still open; things are not what they might be-even when what they might  
be isn't totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western  
thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still  
believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what it has commonly  
25 been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its  
proper form:

- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised  
land;
- and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness."<sup>8</sup>

30 There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and  
marching.

## NOTES

- 1 Hecht, "Exile," in *Millions of Strange Shadows* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), p. 45.
- 2 Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra l'Esodo*, 2 vols. (Rome: A. Belaretti, 1955-56), 1:157-58 (sermon 6) and 1:189-90 (sermon 7); see the discussion of the second of these sermons in *The Letters of Machiavelli*, trans. Allan Gilbert (New York: Capricorn, 1961), pp. 85-89 (letter no. 3).
- 3 I have followed the argument of Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (Exodus), trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem, 1981), 1:39-46; see *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus*, trans. S. M. Lehrman, ed. H. Freeman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1983), 1:29 (pp. 36-37) and *Pirke Aboth: The Ethics of the Talmud*, trans. R. Traveres Herford (New York: Schocken, 1962), 2:6 (p. 46).
- 4 Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963), chap. 3
- 5 *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus*, 5:14 (p. 93); I quote the translation in Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, p. 87
- 6 Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary, trans. M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silberman (Jerusalem, 57733 [1973]), at Exod. 5:1
- 7 See Ibn Ezra on Exod. 13:17, quoted in Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot*, pp. 235, 244.
- 8 W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1982) p. 60.

# Cairo, City in Waiting

by Yasmine El Rashidi

(1977–)

1       What happened in the days following has been widely documented by the  
media—the April 6 Facebook page amassed 70,000 supporters in the space of a  
week, the ensuing protests were the largest the country had seen, and Esraa was  
detained and jailed for 18 days on charges of threatening the security of the State  
5       and inciting violence and anarchy. In her honour and as a statement of solidarity,  
a group of her friends formed the ‘April 6 group’ to lobby for her release. In  
many ways, that moment—her epiphany, the creation of the Facebook page, the  
conception of the April 6 Movement—was indeed the start of the revolution. But  
so is the date of the appointment of Mubarak, and so was the formation of the  
10       first movement for change, Kefaya, and so are the protests that escalated in 2005,  
and the fraudulent parliamentary elections of 2010, and the church bombing of  
the following month. And so was, too, the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser some five  
decades earlier. There is, in the end, no single moment, no single event, no single  
person. There are both events and predicaments— a cultural and social fabric, an  
15       economic reality, an urban landscape – that all came together in the making of the  
Egypt that has weighed down on many of us for years.

      The new force of that movement for change became evident on Friday, 28  
20       January 2011, just after midday prayer. It continues as I write this now—2 May  
2011— and as I do, my one thought, the most significant factor amidst it all, is that  
my relationship with this city, with a culture, with my home, has forever been  
changed, and that my memories of the 18 days, the revolution, are mere fragments  
of a larger journey and search that I now wait to complete.

25       Those fragments—the memories of a revolution—are many.

      There were the riot police, who pulled down their face masks and moved  
forward. Their batons were raised high, their shields above their chests. They  
charged, hundreds of them, grabbing people by the scruff of their necks, kicking  
them, beating them down hard. Many were dragged away, into narrow side-  
30       streets, disappearing. My friend Mohamed vanished, to resurface many days later.

      There was the metal canister, which rocketed up into the air, exploding into  
volcanic fumes. It spiralled down, leaving a helix of trailing smoke that settled,  
eventually, over the square. It was followed by another, and another, and another.

1 Someone said they fired 50 in a row. Many people fell to the ground, choking. My own eyes were filled with tears that felt like blood. I wondered if I would be able to see again. If I would survive.

5 There was the young woman, whose body was limp. They carried her out, her blood on their hands, screaming for help. 'Anyone, please, an ambulance, an ambulance.' There were none, and a young man dropped to his knees by her side, sobbing. She was his sister. She had begged to go out that day, and he had promised his parents she would come to no harm.

10 There were the sounds of bullets assaulting the chants of the crowds. Two men came sprinting from around the corner, their faces gripped with terror. 'It's real, it's real. Live ammunition, they're using live ammunition.' No one knew if it was true – we had heard this before. Minutes later, a procession with three bodies was carried into the square. One, of a young child. Thousands kneeled down in prayer.

15 There was the girl with braided pigtails and a pink dress who carried a flag twice her size. She must have been seven, and was happy that school had been closed. She begged her father for more popcorn, but before he had a chance to answer, she had already lost herself in animated chants. 'Howa yimshi, mish hanimshi!' ('He should leave, we're not leaving!')

20 There was a boy in a mustard-yellow Adidas hoodie who wore a circus-clown wig—red, white and black, the colours of the Egyptian flag. He also carried a sign telling Mubarak to 'Get lost—we deserve change.' He was 18, and said he cared nothing about politics, or his country, until then. Before this, he told me, his life was about studying and 'getting the hell out'.

25 There was the moment when opposition party member Mounir Fakhri Abdel Nour navigated his way through the protesters surrounded by bodyguards. He wore a pale blue shirt and a tweed blazer. People wanted to shake his hand, to take his picture, to share with him ideas. 'This is just the beginning,' he told a woman in her seventies. 'Everyone will have a chance to speak. All voices will be heard. I assure you of that.' The woman's eyes glistened with tears.

30 There was the man with missing teeth who sat on a sidewalk, writing. Page after sketchbook page of Arabic script. His slogans and poems and essays told tales of corruption and vice. He had been in that same spot for two weeks and said he would stay until the day he died. 'I carry the emotion of a nation, not only my own.'

35 There was the novelist Ahdaf Soueif, who carried three bulging nylon bags, hanging on her arm. Cookies and small savoury pastries. 'I come every day,' she said, dipping into one bag. She wore dark sunglasses, but they did little to conceal who she was. Crowds gathered around her, all with stories of struggle. They asked her to give them voice. She listened, for hours, and promised to help.

40 There was always the mother of Khaled Said, who one day walked onto 'Liberation' stage in Tahrir Square. She held a picture of her son. 'My son's blood, and that of the martyrs of this square, will not be lost in vain. We will not give up. We will not give up. We will not give up.' The crowd erupted into roars of

1 And then there were the friends.

A friend, long housebound, ridden with depression, said he felt reborn. I saw him every day in the square, marching, chanting, and when it was over, dancing in the streets, holding his head up high.

5 A dancer friend cancelled a performance in Europe to remain in Egypt and take part in the protests.

An artist friend cancelled a lecture series in New York.

A writer friend flew back from Los Angeles, and a filmmaker friend from DC.

10 A friend who fled Egypt 22 years ago vowing never to return, came back, on day eight. She decided it was time.

And there was my mother, a fragile woman who is uncomfortable in crowds and had watched the protests unfold with fear on TV, who told me one day that she wanted to come out and march as well. She had been moved to tears by the story of Google executive Wael Ghonim, and by the stories of those killed.

15 My father and I spoke at least three times a day in those days of the revolution. Ours had been a decade of strained contact. We reconciled, and then bonded, over a city—ours.

To look back on those days—to remember—is to reflect on 18 days that I  
20 sense we may live in the shadow of for years to come. I watched people fall to the ground, gasping their last breaths. I fell to the ground myself, choking on tear gas. We dodged bullets and ran from armed men. We taped our windows with newspapers and formed barricades around our homes. My mother's porter attached a kitchen knife to a broomstick and took to the streets. He said he would  
25 die protecting her, with his spear. Many of us helped wipe the blood pouring from young men's heads. For the first time in our lives, some of us saw dead bodies lying on the streets. I tried to pry out a bullet from beneath a friend's skin. We ran for cover, from rocks, from Molotov cocktails, from thugs. We became paranoid. We no longer knew whose side a stranger was on. And might he be armed? I had  
30 seen many knives stuck in many belts and trouser pockets. I had seen many guns, too. It took us a while to get used to the sight of the army and men with weapons on our streets. For days, we didn't know if they would shoot.

We waited, each day, for something to happen, for something to change. We waited, for hours, as well, for the President to speak.

35 To look back on those days, is also to look into a new archive of images and a reservoir of emotions that I never thought—until January 2011—I would ever bear witness to. Cairo, to me, was a city overwhelmed, a city so mammoth in its proportions. Into its sepia-toned landscape, its 20 million people would slip, through dark alleyways, to be forgotten by a world around them that seemed stark  
40 of possibilities. This Cairo that I lived in spared no one, and everywhere I turned, every corner of every street I knew, there were intimations of struggle. Even my house seemed to have grown weary, as burdened and sad and oppressed as a greying building can be.

1 In those 18 days that have come to be known as the ‘Egyptian revolution’, as I  
navigated my way between my grandmother’s house—which had become home  
again some four years before—and Tahrir Square, I watched something, very slowly,  
transform. The street-side vendor suddenly had an Egyptian flag; the taxi driver  
5 had an opinion; the young man on the street was no longer scared to say that there  
was something he didn’t like; the tree trunks were painted red, white and black; the  
youth, once skulking, were now handing out flyers, forming political parties and  
collectives, chanting, discussing, planning, hoping, for those better lives. For every  
emotion, every thought, every idea, now, there was an audience, and on the same  
10 street corners that were once host to dejection, possibility was being born. I watched,  
in the days of the Egyptian uprising and the months that followed, human emotion  
finding an outlet, and in tandem discovering its source. I witnessed, in the waiting  
time of those days until 5.56 p.m. on 11 February, dignity restored. In myself, too.

15 IV

I bumped into my neighbour at the supermarket the other day. A retired Gulf  
20 Air executive, he had been active on Facebook during the uprising when protesters  
occupied Tahrir Square. I hadn’t seen or spoken to him since, and his warnings,  
posted on my Facebook wall, were always left unanswered.

‘Yas,’ he said, taking my hand, shaking it.

‘You know,’ he said, half smiling, half serious, his face pale, ‘it was very risky  
25 what you did, by the way.’

I must have looked puzzled.

‘This business of going down to Tahrir,’ he offered. ‘Very high risk.’

I laughed.

‘You could have been killed. Your poor Mom. What were you thinking?’

30 ‘Well, we got rid of the President!’ I retorted.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘let’s see if things improve. You know, the economy has taken a  
big blow, Yasmine. People need jobs. Life is hard.’

‘And I just hope you guys are going to take care of these Salafists and  
Islamists now,’ he continued, slowing down, taking in my own slight nod of  
35 acknowledgement.

‘You know, we’re all waiting to see,’ he said, closing the conversation and  
walking away.

Cairo  
May 2011

# Welcome to the Anthropocene

by Elizabeth Kolbert  
(1961–)

1 In 1949, a pair of Harvard psychologists recruited two dozen undergraduates  
for an experiment about perception. The experiment was simple: students were  
shown playing cards and asked to identify them as they flipped by. Most of the  
cards were perfectly ordinary, but a few had been doctored, so that the deck  
5 contained, among other oddities, a red six of spades and a black four of hearts.  
When the cards went by rapidly, the students tended to overlook the incongruities;  
they would, for example, assert that the red six of spades was a six of hearts, or  
call the black four of hearts a four of spades. When the cards went by more slowly,  
they struggled to make sense of what they were seeing. Confronted with a red  
10 spade, some said it looked “purple” or “brown” or “rusty black.” Others were  
completely flummoxed.

The symbols “look reversed or something,” one observed.

15 “I can’t make the suit out, whatever it is,” another exclaimed. “I don’t know  
what color it is now or whether it’s a spade or heart. I’m not even sure now what  
a spade looks like! My God!”

20 The psychologists wrote up their findings in a paper titled “On the Perception  
of Incongruity: A Paradigm.” Among those who found this paper intriguing was  
Thomas Kuhn. To Kuhn, the twentieth century’s most influential historian of  
science, the experiment was indeed paradigmatic: it revealed how people process  
disruptive information. Their first impulse is to force it into a familiar framework:  
hearts, spades, clubs. Signs of mismatch are disregarded for as long as possible—  
the red spade looks “brown” or “rusty.” At the point the anomaly becomes simply  
too glaring, a crisis ensues—what the psychologists dubbed the “ ‘My God!’  
reaction.”

25 This pattern was, Kuhn argued in his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific  
Revolutions*, so basic that it shaped not only individual perceptions but entire fields  
of inquiry. Data that did not fit the commonly accepted assumptions of a discipline  
would either be discounted or explained away for as long as possible. The more  
contradictions accumulated, the more convoluted the rationalizations became. “In  
30 science, as in the playing card experiment, novelty emerges only with difficulty,”  
Kuhn wrote. But then, finally, someone came along who was willing to call a red

1 spade a red spade. Crisis led to insight, and the old framework gave way to a  
new one. This is how great scientific discoveries or, to use the term Kuhn made  
so popular, “paradigm shifts” took place.

5 The history of the science of extinction can be told as a series of paradigm  
shifts. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the very category of extinction  
didn’t exist. The more strange bones were unearthed—mammoths, Megatherium,  
mosasaurs—the harder naturalists had to squint to fit them into a familiar  
framework. And squint they did. The giant bones belonged to elephants that had  
been washed north, or hippos that had wandered west, or whales with malevolent  
10 grins. When Cuvier arrived in Paris, he saw that the mastodon’s molars could  
not be fit into the established framework, a “My God” moment that led him to  
propose a whole new way of seeing them. Life, Cuvier recognized, had a history.  
This history was marked by loss and punctuated by events too terrible for human  
imagining. “Though the world does not change with a change of paradigm, the  
15 scientist afterward works in a different world” is how Kuhn put it.

In his *Recherches sur les ossements fossiles*, Cuvier listed dozens of espèces perdues,  
and he felt sure there were more awaiting discovery. Within a few decades, so  
many extinct creatures had been identified that Cuvier’s framework began to  
crack. To keep pace with the growing fossil record, the number of disasters had  
20 to keep multiplying. “God knows how many catastrophes” would be needed,  
Lyell scoffed, poking fun at the whole endeavor. Lyell’s solution was to reject  
catastrophe altogether. In Lyell’s—and later Darwin’s—formulation, extinction  
was a lonely affair. Each species that had vanished had shuffled off all on its own,  
a victim of the “struggle for life” and its own defects as a “less improved form.”

25 The uniformitarian account of extinction held up for more than a century. Then,  
with the discovery of the iridium layer, science faced another crisis. (According  
to one historian, the Alvarezes’ work was “as explosive for science as an impact  
would have been for earth.”) The impact hypothesis dealt with a single moment in  
time—a terrible, horrible, no-good day at the end of the Cretaceous. But that single  
30 moment was enough to crack the framework of Lyell and Darwin. Catastrophes  
did happen. What is sometimes labeled neocatastrophism, but is mostly nowadays  
just regarded as standard geology, holds that conditions on earth change only  
very slowly, except when they don’t. In this sense the reigning paradigm is neither  
Cuvierian nor Darwinian but combines key elements of both—“long periods of  
35 boredom interrupted occasionally by panic.” Though rare, these moments of panic  
are disproportionately important. They determine the pattern of extinction, which  
is to say, the pattern of life....

Obviously, the fate of our own species concerns us disproportionately. But at  
the risk of sounding anti-human—some of my best friends are humans!—I will  
40 say that it is not, in the end, what’s most worth attending to. Right now, in the  
amazing moment that to us counts as the present, we are deciding, without quite  
meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will



- 1 forever be closed. No other creature has ever managed this, and it will, unfortunately, be our most enduring legacy. The Sixth Extinction will continue to determine the course of life long after everything people have written and painted and built has been ground into dust and giant rats have—or have not—inherited
- 5 the earth.

# Notes

Connected Learning in  
a Time of Confinement

# Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

by Wendell Berry  
(1934–)

- 1 Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.
- 5 And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something
- 10 they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.  
So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.
- 15 Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.
- 20 Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.  
Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
- 25 Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.
- 30 Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.  
Put your faith in the two inches of humus

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From "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" from *The Country of Marriage*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. 1973. Also published by Counterpoint Press in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry*, 1999; *The Mad Farmer Poems*, 2008; *New Collected Poems*, 2012.

- 1 Listen to carrion—put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
- 5 Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.  
So long as women do not go cheap  
for power, please women more than men.  
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy
- 10 a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?  
Go with your love to the fields.
- 15 Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,
- 20 lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.
- 25 Practice resurrection.

# Image of the Week



**Didier Massard, *Le Sphinx (Sphinx)*, 1996**

# Notes

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# Guiding Questions

**The best questions arise from careful listening (to the author, oneself, and others), and from the spontaneity of wonder**

## **Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution***

- Do you think of suffering as a training ground or a refining fire? What are the strengths and limitations of these metaphors from Exodus?
- How are we to understand the story of Moses killing the taskmaster?
- Walzer contrasts Moses' action with the inaction of the elders. Why do some revolt and others don't?
- In what ways does the Exodus story shape our own understanding of politics?

## **Yasmine El Rashidi, "Cairo, City in Waiting"**

- When do revolutions begin?
- What experiences does El Rashidi document? Do you see yourself in any of those experiences?
- Was what happened in Cairo a revolution?
- What allows or prevents a revolution from enduring?

## **Elizabeth Kolbert, "Welcome to the Anthropocene"**

- What is the experiment? How do you respond to disruptive information?
- What is a paradigm shift? Have you ever had a paradigm shift in your own thinking?
- Kolbert highlights the environmental and evolutionary implications of human action. Are we destined to a revolution or a renewal in our relationship to nature?
- "We are deciding...which evolutionary

pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed." Is this true for society as well as the environment? What social and ethical pathways are being determined at the moment?

## **Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"**

- Read the poem aloud: What words, images, and/or feelings does the poem evoke in you?
- The poem calls itself a manifesto. In what ways is it a manifesto? Is it a manifesto for revolution? Rebellion? Renewal?
- What parts of the poem's advice do you want to heed? What advice makes you uncomfortable?
- What does the last line mean for you?

## **Didier Massard, *Le Sphinx (Sphinx)*, 1996**

- Set a timer and look at the image for 3 minutes: What do you see? What feelings does the image evoke?
- Is the image one of decline or renewal? Of power or weakness?
- What does the image suggest about the intersection of time and space?

## **General questions for the week**

- Are we (you, society) in a period of revolution or renewal?
- Against what are you inclined to rebel?
- Must there be a revolution for renewal to occur?
- What has your allegiance?

# Short Guide to Leading a Discussion

## General Principles for Participants

- Read the text(s) to be discussed in their entirety (ideally twice)
- Make notes about what you understand, don't understand, agree or disagree with
- Focus comments and conversation on the ideas expressed in the shared text(s), not on outside
- knowledge
- Seek to understand your fellow participants, not to persuade them
- Be freely authentic and morally present
- Listen to the text, to others, and to yourself

## General principles for discussion leaders:

- Hold the space for honesty and vulnerability: be honest and vulnerable yourself
- Ask questions, don't teach: the aim is shared understanding and meaning, not agreement
- Be attached to the conversation: avoid rigidly following your planned order of questions
- Make sure every voice is heard: don't move too quickly to fill the silence
- Start and end on time: end not with conclusions but with questions you're taking away

## Format:

- Match the texts to the time allotted (*Each text can productively stimulate 20-40 minutes of discussion, and can be read discussed individually or together in one sitting, depending on the time available; it is better to end with more to be said, rather than straining to fill the time*)
- Begin with introductions:
  - name (if not everyone is well known to one another)

- what is on your heart and mind?
- the person speaking chooses the next person
- Set the frame:
  - remind participants to enjoy the gift of time and conversation by avoiding other
  - distractions
  - revisit the key general principles above
- It always helps to read a passage aloud
- Layer your questions: be patient, each layer builds upon the next
  - What does the text say? (sometimes we read the same thing different ways)
  - What does the text mean? (sometimes we interpret the text differently)
  - What does the text mean to me? (sometimes we apply the texts to ourselves differently)
  - What does the text mean for us? (we may have different understandings of what the text means for living in community)
  - What does the text mean for society? (we may have different approaches to what the text implies for action in society)

## Some helpful tips to keep the conversation going (for discussion leaders and participants):

- "say more about that"
- "where do you see that in the text?"
- "how is that related to what N said earlier?"
- "do you think that's true?"
- "do others see it the same way?"
- "what did you see in the text that we haven't addressed?"



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