

My Walden

When I ponder our curiously unbalanced civilization, able to put golf carts on Mars but unable to equal the verse of muddy Elizabethan London, I wonder why we

are as we are. In all things technological, the United States is magnificent, the Athens of transistors. Yet the symphonies die unlistened to, we have no Shakespeare or Dante nor notion why we might want them, and religious expression grows mute or crabbed and hostile. Why?

I think the answer is that our surroundings determine not just what we think, but what we can think. We live in cities urban but not urbane, among screaming sirens, air grayed by exhaust and the blattings of buses. The complaint is not invalid for being trite. I cannot imagine a Whitman composing in a shopping mall.

The rush and complexity of everything take their toll. As a people we might well be called the Unrelaxed and, therefore, the Uncontemplative.

Other lives are possible, or were possible. Years ago, I passed a summer in Hampden-Sydney, my small college on a huge wooded campus in then rural Virginia. The students were blessedly gone.

Along the Via Sacra, as the only road on campus was called, under blue skies going on forever and forever, there was silence, absolute silence, unless you count the twittering of birds and the keening of bugs in ancient oaks. These may be sounds, but they are not noise. They are not even music, but something before, older, earlier, better. Vivaldi was a great man, but here he was out of his league. The professors' houses, dignified but not pretentious, watched from yards shaded by old trees. It was quiet and warm, and you were with your thoughts.

It was terribly unmodern. At night the stars shone in the black infinite and there was no noise. No noise. There a Thoreau could have written or a Corot painted. I do not think this possible in clangorous suburban ugliness.

Following the Via Sacra, you came to Black Bottom, where the road ended in woods and there was a pond with a swan in it. The place was not the stuff of photographic magazines, just the quiet, bug-loud second growth of Virginia. In a lengthening life, I have seen nothing more peaceful. To the left, a trail of red clay, speckled with mica, wound through the pines down and down to Slippery Rock. Deep in the woods, a

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small stream splashed through the red banks and slid over a flat rock covered with moss. Few knew of it. My father, before there was electricity, came here to slide into the pool below. As did I.

On many afternoons, I read there, or did nothing, or watched the water striders skating on the surface, their feet in little depressions in the water. Being then a student of physics and chemistry, I knew somewhat of surface tension and surfactants and the preferences of hydrogen bonds, but I also knew I was looking at something beyond my comprehension. It was not a scientific observation. Scientists take things apart but, except for the greats, do not notice the whole. The greats are few on the ground.

Such places change one's inner world. At Slippery Rock, I thought things I could not in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, with its sirens and traffic and quietly angry people connected to iPods. Wilson Boulevard, where I lived, was by no means horrible. I liked its restaurants and bars and sushi joints. The people weren't evil. But it was terribly unquiet.

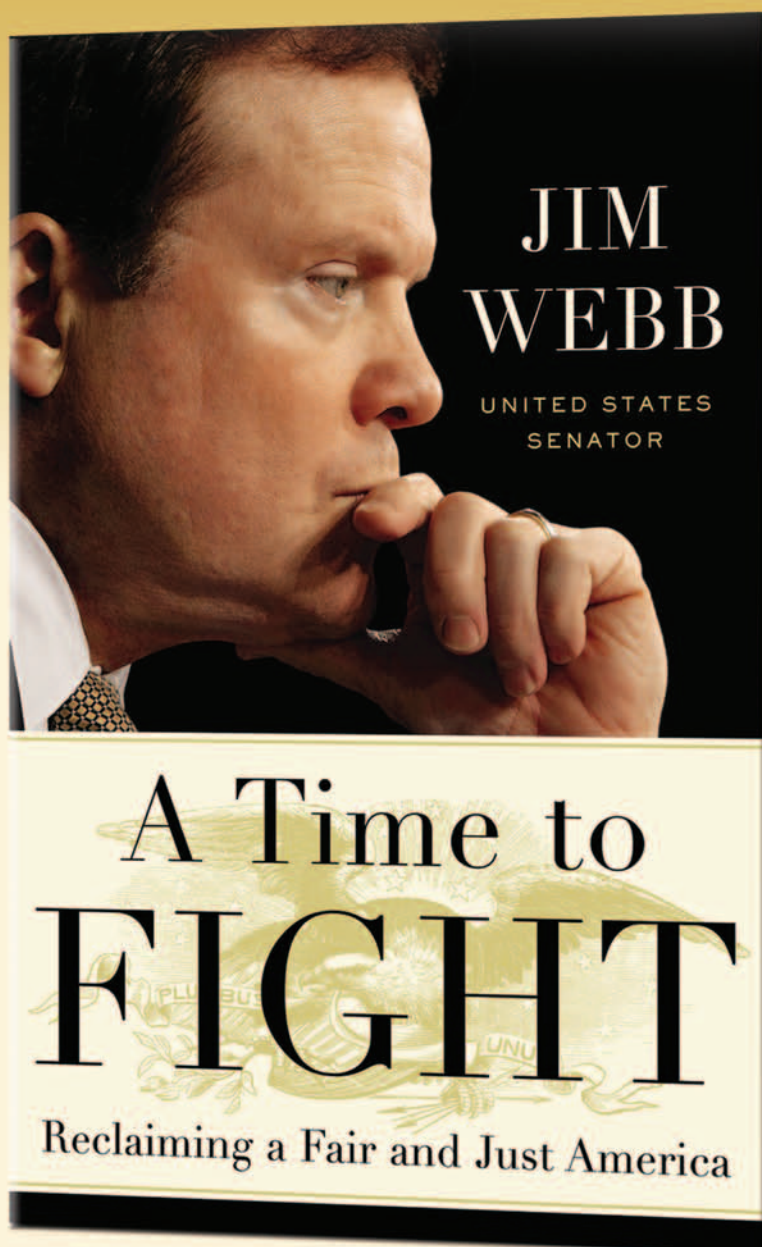
I am not religious, at least in the sense of believing that I have the answers, but I am religious in the sense of knowing the questions. I know that there are things we can't know, things even more important than making partner before the age of 30. Doubtless most of us know this. Yet the tenor of life is not easily escaped. We try. People rush to Europe in search of the old, the quiet, and the pretty. Peddlers of real estate understand the urge, and hawk tranquil rural life while building the

malls that will make it impossible. And so hurry comes to Arcadia. People then think of escape to the next small town. We spend a remarkable amount of time fleeing ourselves. Maybe instead we should build a place we like.

Few precisely like what we have, I suppose, but how does one escape it? In noise-ridden cities smelling of exhaust, where the stars languish obscured by smoke, the rivers run semi-poisonous, and much of the populace can barely read, how can anyone think beyond the stock market and the next empty copulation? The Milnes and Donnes and Marlowes don't exist because they can't, and we don't want them because we can't want them. ■

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