

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT—4**  
(NEW SERIES—2007)



**A PATHETIC INTERLUDE:**

***CARLETON COLLEGE  
CORRUPTED:  
IS REVEALED AS  
VACUOUS, PITIFUL MOCKERY!***



***NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE  
UNINTENTIONALLY RUNS  
TRUTH-TELLING PIECE!!***



**WRITING PROF DOESN'T KNOW  
*WHAT TO WEAR!!!***



***COLLEGE, NATION, DOOMED***

- ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●
- ENEMIES LIST:***
- 1) THE LEFT GATEKEEPERS
  - 2) THE “DEMOCRATIC PARTY”
  - 3) THE NEO-CONSERVATIVES
  - 4) THE BLINDED NATION
- ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

## 1

I'm calling this piece "A Pathetic Interlude" for the two simple reasons that, first, it *is* pathetic, and, second, it *does* constitute a break in my ongoing series of emergency-alarms about the danger and destructiveness of the Gatekeepers. I hadn't expected—and didn't want—such an "interlude," and in fact I'd already begun working on a piece about Amy Goodman, who now, to the detriment of us all, has become a print columnist. But whether I wanted it or not, the *New York Times* brought about this change of plans by publishing a piece that actually—unwittingly, it hardly need be said—*tells the truth* about Carleton College, a place once dear to me and—as readers of the book will know—an institution that plays an important role in *A Nation Gone Blind*.

As I reluctantly set the quisling Gatekeepers aside for the moment, I *will* mention, however, that I believe myself right now (thanks in big part to the poison fruits that *they*, the Gatekeepers, have sown) to be more frightened by world affairs than I have been at any moment since October 1962, when once before the survival of the globe hung literally in the balance—during the Cuban missile crisis.

Now, after all—thanks both to the quisling Gatekeepers and to the recently elected and *equally* quisling non-Democrats in the nation's non-Democratic Congress—we've all been put on an alert that's the equivalent of looking down the barrel of a primed and loaded nuclear cannon. Thanks on the one hand to the intelligence and subtlety of our criminal leaders, and on the other, to the blindness and stupefied passivity of us as a "people," not only is <http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/headlines07/0128-05.htm> "America 'Poised to Strike at Iran's Nuclear Sites' from Bases in Bulgaria and Romania," but we also read about <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=NAZ20061001&articleId=3361> "The March to War: Naval build-up in the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean," while a perfectly sane citizen-writer-observer can conclude, in a piece called "Who Are We," that <http://ichblog.eu/content/view/306/2/> "We are the New Fascists. Don't you dare to use the word freedom again with out the word hypocrite conjoined."

All of this, and *then* no less a globally power-hungry Machiavellian than [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zbigniew\\_Brzezinski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zbigniew_Brzezinski) Zbigniew Brzezinski, author of [http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Chessboard-American-Geostrategic-Imperatives/dp/0465027261/sr=1-1/qid=1170770249/ref=pd\\_bbs\\_sr\\_1/104-4231058-3189532?ie=UTF8&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/Grand-Chessboard-American-Geostrategic-Imperatives/dp/0465027261/sr=1-1/qid=1170770249/ref=pd_bbs_sr_1/104-4231058-3189532?ie=UTF8&s=books) *The Grand Chessboard* and long-time counselor to the titans among hegemonists, testified just five days ago, on February 1, before the Senate Foreign Relations committee, urging *that diplomatic measures be taken immediately as means of resolving the Iraq conflict and bringing that war to a close*.

*What can such a thing conceivably mean?* What else *can* it mean other than that *even Zbigniew Brzezinski* now sees good reason to be afraid of the criminals in the White

House and of what they might do or maybe even already *have* done? And us? Ours is not to know, ours is only to remain greatly in fear. Here's a powerful piece, from February 4, that <http://cryptogon.com/?p=320> not only contemplates the truth about what may be happening but also offers Brzezinski's actual testimony.

Dave Lindorff asks <http://www.commondreams.org/views07/0120-29.htm> whether the Iraq disaster, blamed on incompetence, was in fact a deliberately planned act of treason. And cryptogon.com asks us, in his <http://cryptogon.com/?p=320> Brzezinski piece, whether we <http://cryptogon.com/?p=310> "Recall what I said about a military coup being the only thing that could stop the war with Iran?" A close friend, whom I respect very much, asks the same thing, in an exchange of letters. So do I.

In a world governed by criminals, and in a nation gone blind, we may be destined to witness unspeakable things.

Still, let's go to that Carleton College piece in the *Times*. After all, *it's* unspeakable, too. And, further, it's *also* related—deeply—to the grave dangers that threaten us now and to the diminishing likelihood that we'll be able to avert them.

## 2

There was a time when I was more or less in love with <http://www.carleton.edu/> Carleton College, although in the years since my graduation in 1963, I think that it—far from alone among its sister institutions across the nation—has lost what was once rich, remarkable, and nourishing about it, while at the same time it has multiplied and brought to perfection those qualities that, visible to some degree even forty-five years ago, were perfidious, meretricious, inorganic, and complacent.

In good part though hardly all, my love for the place had to do with *time*. In my second novel, <http://www.abebooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=eric+larsen&y=11&tn=i+am+zoe+handke&bsi=0&x=76&prevpage=3> *I Am Zoë Handke*, I sent Zoë to college there and, between it, her, and me, came up with some of the best stuff I've ever written, if I may say so without being struck by lightning.

Here's Zoë's first paragraph in the chapter that I affectionately nickname "Zoë Goes to College":

The building I lived in stood among spreading shade trees on a wide expanse of flat ground from which it seemed to rise up naturally as an imposing and yet modest structure. Three stories high, of a comfortably weathered gray brick, it allowed the eye to move casually upward toward a gabled roof forested by symmetrical groupings of high and ornate yet sentinel-like chimneys. I came to cherish this building, finding an unpretentious and sustaining dignity in its proportioned expression of extreme simplicity and quiet unassuming elegance.

The building that served as model for those sentences was a women's dormitory built in the early 1880s and named Gridley Hall. It was still there in 1963, when I left Carleton, but not long afterward it was razed. Then, emptiness.

I don't know the finances or economics of it, but the decision to raze Gridley was—considering the very nature of what colleges are and should be—a disaster. A previous incident of the same kind occurred in my sophomore year, when the glorious old Williams Hall was razed, in October of 1961. Williams went up in 1880, and it plays a hugely vital and important role in *I Am Zoë Handke*. Zoë spends a night alone in the old building and, like Pascal, stares into infinity. So haunting was Williams that it found its way also, if more briefly, into my fourth novel, *The Decline and Fall of the American Nation*. You can read about the poor, gracious, lost building in this excerpt <http://www.ericlarsen.net/declinefragment.3.html> (and even see the pictures!).



I loved the college, in other words, because in some ways and to some extent it stopped time. And *that*—or so it seemed to me, as a student of history and the arts—was a great part of what made *meaningful* study, at least at the college level, possible.

There's a lot more to it than just that, of course, but, in any case, I think it's better to let Zoë talk about it than for me. Here she is, in her "Prologue" to the college-chapter in the book. First, she herself speaks. Then, she reads a section from an old book that I wrote for her and arranged for her to find. And then, in four numbered passages, she speaks again:

By great good fortune, I arrived at the College of West Tree in the last few years that remained before its character was to change forever.

When I arrived at West Tree in the autumn of 1959, a century of its history had passed. These hundred years had of course first seen the conception of the college and its early growth, but then, equally and perhaps even more important, they had endowed it with a generous plenitude of slowly passing decades during which nothing was required of it other than that it remain as it was and allow itself to be more perfectly formed by the work of time: to mellow and age, to become gradually softened and worn, to steep in the sun-warmed redolence of its endlessly repetitive, quietly reflective, essentially unchanging existence.

I had the good fortune, in other words, to be a student there in the small handful of years that marked the institution's brief moment of greatest and most profound maturity.



I am struck that those who speak most earnestly about the high importance of education are among that number most eager also to assert of education that it is "a living thing." Whether itself valid or not, the premise leads to a corollary voiced most commonly in phrases such as "the living past," "our living heritage," and "living bodies of knowledge." I depart from these analysts

and register my contention that the corollary is imperceptive and fallacious, as its being dressed in the threadbare robes of cliché may suggest.

Certainly it is far more evident that what truly vitalizes education toward the baccalaureate is precisely the fact that, as it occurs, one dwells in the company not of the living, but of the dead. Consider for a moment a young person's experience in first entering into the membership of an ancient college, and scrutinize the exact nature of that new student's surroundings. The statue, quietness, poise, and resonance; the dignity and prestige; the stability, calmness, reverence, ceremony, and tradition; the rare and treasured whispers of profundity; even the texture and the very scent and feel themselves of gaining an education—it seems to me that every one of these things exists precisely because, as a student, one lives within the very rooms and halls, passes through the very doors, makes one's way along the paths, not of the living but of the dead: of those who have gone before; those who are no longer here; those who may or may not have left something behind.

—Professor Gilbert Charles  
Durham, DLitt., *A Philosophic  
Etiology of the Baccalaureate*  
(Baltimore, 1927), pp. 17-18



*Notes:*

1. The first member of my family to go to college, I left at home behind me fear, uncertainty, and approaching death. I did not yet know what field of study I would take up.

2. My initial sight of the town of West Tree, on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1959, came to me from a window of the train I rode on as it turned to follow a curve in the small prairie river approaching from the south. From a mile or so away, as it came into view, the town revealed itself to me where it lay on the twin low banks of the river in afternoon sunlight. A scattering of church steeples penetrated through a canopy of thick foliage that, in those very earliest days of autumn, clung to its heavy summertime density of a deep, luxuriant green.

3. The college itself stood a short distance beyond the northeast edge of West Tree, separated from the town also by merit of its standing at least in part on a softly rounded prairie hill that gave it a slight but noticeable rise in elevation. The brick structures and stone pilings of the college's building, obscured by trees and late-summer foliage, revealed themselves to me in glimpses as I made my way toward them from the train station near the center of the town, my imagination being supplied only gradually with an emerging sense of the whole. I saw a turret here and there, and some distance away a high tower of gray stone. Through the leaves, there appeared nearby a slope or two of tiled roof. For a time, I had an unobstructed view of the upper floor and roof of what I took to be a very old building, square in shape, of softened red brick, surmounted by a wooden tower on each of whose sides was a clock face with shapely black hands. I imagined these tower clocks—themselves unsheltered, exposed without respite to the light and head of the sun—as gazing down like mentors and guards over shaded walkways and across quiet, spreading lawns in the old, time-worn interior of the campus itself.

4. The day of my arrival was poised, warm, summerlike, and calm. As I made my way up the hill, carrying my suitcase first in one hand and then the other, there was

silence all around me. Briefly, at the top of the hill, I walked on level ground in unbroken sunlight. Then I entered in under the shade of trees.

### 3

Almost half a century after Zoë walked in among the trees that September afternoon in 1959, the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* for January 4, 2007, ran a piece by Dennis Cass that was entitled “My New Look” and that began this way: “When I landed a job teaching writing at Carleton College, the first thing I did was buy a hip new wardrobe.”

Am I alone in finding the very *idea* here unseemly at best, childish and repellent at worst? I don’t doubt that throughout history every new or incoming student—if able to afford it—might get hold of some new clothes *and* hope that they’re of the right fashion. So what’s the difference here? The difference here is that this guy’s a *faculty member*. This guy, twittering away like some *Osrice*, is in fact one of the *professors*.

Now, I well expect that many a reader—à la Walter Kirn and the absurd Kirnians—is likely to tell me that I’m missing the *point* here, and the *reason* I’m missing it is that I’m failing to sense, and therefore to read, the *irony* in and of the piece. Ah, ha, says I! It’s *ironic*! And I know what *that* means. It means that the writer, hiding behind a glib, superior, and insouciant tone the way Walter Kirn did, that the writer—that’s right, like Kirn—can speak falsehoods, write lies, distort the truth *and it won’t matter—because it’s all ironic!*

Oh, I understand that idea perfectly well. I understand *irony* of all sorts—I’ve read Sophocles, Chaucer, Conrad, Beckett, Joyce, Swift, Austen. But irony is different from “irony,” the latter being the Kirnian device of posing behind a veil of nothing more than affectation in *style*. And, while true irony can reveal truths deeper than those on the visible “surface,” “irony”—<http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought3.html> as we’ve seen in Kirn—is little more than an excuse to lie.

And, besides, Kirnian “irony” isn’t really what we’re dealing with here. What we’re dealing with *here*, in the Dennis Cass piece, is <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593760981/ref=nosim/104-1974668-7081548?n=283155> *blindness*.



Let’s see if we can prove what I just said. And let’s do it by asking what motives there could have been for Cass to say what he does say in his second, third, and fourth sentences, immediately after the words “hip new wardrobe.” In fact, here’s a better idea:

I'll *identify* the motives and *then* show the sentences, so that readers can confirm or deny for themselves.

There were two motives, and *neither* of them included a reach for irony in any kind of attempt to go below the surface. Not at all. The *first* motive was, simply, the impulse to follow the path of least resistance by turning to the ease of cliché. And the *second* motive, equally serious but more complex, was the impulse to follow an unseeing, unthinking, typically “American”—and highly toxic—celebration of *laziness and sloth* as *signatures of authenticity and sincerity in character*.

Here are the three sentences:

Twenty years earlier I was a slovenly underachiever at this small, Midwestern liberal-arts school, and new clothes would mark my triumphant return. Also, I had never taught before. If I failed as a teacher, at least my students would think I was cool.

Suppose that a person had *no* idea of the cultural history of the past half-century; or that a person had *no* idea of what Carleton College once was like; or that a person had *no* idea of what getting an education at a place like Carleton half a century ago could be like; suppose that a person—as would seem to be true of Cass himself—had *that* complete a degree of ignorance and inexperience; *then* perhaps Cass's words could be taken—as they're clearly taken by *him* and as they're clearly taken also by the *Times* editors—as being merely weightless and insignificant. But for anyone who *does* know the things I've mentioned, who *does* have experience of them—well, for such a person as that, Cass's words are ugly, poisonous, misbegotten, diseased, and sign-posts of the greatest of dangers.

Let's go ahead and drop Cass's little exercise in fake self-deprecation, his “aw shucks, I'm just a dummy” badge of pseudo honor. Let that go, but, as we do so, let us not forget that what we're talking about here is a place that was *once* a true, real, top-flight school, and, further, that we're talking about an instructor there *now* who declares it a distinction that he's a *dummy*. Still, as I said, let it go. There's worse to follow as Cass reveals in other ways both that he's *not* a qualified teacher of writing *and* that, in truth, he's just another of those millions and millions and millions of Americans who have themselves gone blind in a *nation* gone blind.

I'm sure it's true that there's never been a time in human history when the externals and superficialities of “style” played no role in life. But there *was* a time when what an instructor knew, or said, or showed in mastery of a field counted for more than what he *looked like on the outside*—more, that is, than whether or not he was perceived as *cool*.

And, oh, man, is Cass ever interested in what's on the outside. He seems to have failed (god knows how, since he *lives* only forty miles away) to have made an exploratory visit to the campus where he was later hired, since, never having seen them, he turns out to be completely wrong about what he thinks his students will be dressed like—and, as a

result, finds that his *own* costume is in great excess. But never fear—his being dressed wrong doesn't mean that the reader is going to be deprived of hearing all about it:

I realized my mistake the first day of class. In general, no one on campus was dressed up. More specifically, no one was wearing leather tennis shoes, flared jeans, a studded belt, a brown-and-teal striped shirt and a purple velvet jacket. Walking across the quad, I felt as if I were being followed by a helicopter.

Why he doesn't identify "the quad" by its *real* Carleton name, "the bald spot," I'll never know, although I do have a couple of good guesses—which you won't find here. Let's just get right into class, where we hear that the "kids" were "wonderful" as they "gathered around me in an eager semicircle." More:

They dressed casually—one even came to class in bedroom slippers—but I didn't care. My new wardrobe both gave me confidence and reminded me of my pledge to deliver more than writing-workshop clichés like "show, don't tell."

Is it a cliché even if it's true, useful, and pertinent? But let it go. There's worse in Cass's solecism about the kids who "gathered" around him in "an eager semicircle." Yes, those geometric forms are certainly emotional, aren't they.

I'm charged with *nit*-picking, do I hear? Let me respond: Fire this guy on the spot, I say.

And so what happened? Cass explains: "Then, one morning, while putting on my black, hand-tooled belt, I had an idea." Well, blow me down. A different belt *and* an idea. What *could* this idea possibly *be*?

"People talk about hidden meanings," I said in class later that day. "But it's all right here, out in the open. The world is vibrating [sic] with information."

Their assignment was to say what my clothes revealed about me as a person, while I wrote their observations on the blackboard. I then let them take a good, long look.

A Note To the Reader: Any writing teacher who uses the phrase "revealed about me as a person" can't conceivably have completed his qualifying course of study as a writing teacher. Such a person, it's obvious, hasn't even read [http://www.amazon.com/Elements-Style-Fourth-William-Strunk/dp/0205313426/sr=1-3/qid=1170955223/ref=sr\\_1\\_3/104-4231058-3189532?ie=UTF8&s=books](http://www.amazon.com/Elements-Style-Fourth-William-Strunk/dp/0205313426/sr=1-3/qid=1170955223/ref=sr_1_3/104-4231058-3189532?ie=UTF8&s=books) Strunk and White.

But let it go. The students do take Cass up on his offer and, although "tentatively" at first, they comment on what his clothes "reveal about him as a person." Says one, "The shoes and the belt don't quite match"; another that "You hang out in coffee shops trying to look like an artist"; another that "You shop at Whole Foods for the image, not because it's good for you"; and yet another—a palpable hit!—that "It's not so much professional as a *semblance* [sic] of professionalism."

Do we need to go farther? “In their eyes,” writes Cass,

“I drove a Prius and looked down on people who ate at McDonald’s. I was a cat person who listened to jazz. At first my shoes meant I couldn’t afford Converse, then one student noted they were a cloying—and grossly more expensive—knockoff. Even the incorrect observations were cutting, but what killed was the refrain. Whether talking about my jeans (“Are those really Rock & Republic?”) or my sideburns (“It’s like, Look at Mr. ’70s”) they used words like “wishes” and “wannabe.”

In short, Cass survives his embarrassment. His students, he grants, are more right about him “as a person” than wrong. He does make a few corrections. ““For the record, I go to bars, not coffee shops,” I said, to faint laughter.”

And at last, concluding this entire abysmal show, he gives his students the worst conceivable advice that can possibly have been given to aspiring writers by anyone, anywhere, ever, from Plato to today:

I then told them about the origins of my new look, and how I stuck to it out of principle.

“Writing is about commitment,” I said. “To a point of view. To an argument. You commit, and you never back down.”

That, not to put too fine a point on it, is the purest idiocy I have ever heard.

## 4

In the first chapter of <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593760981/ref=nosim/104-1974668-7081548?n=283155> *A Nation Gone Blind*, I analyze a number of essays produced by writers whom the State Department hired, paying them to write on the question, “In what sense do you see yourself as an American writer?” The results, by and large, were awful, and much of the time worse than awful, from writers both well known and little known. The thesis in *A Nation Gone Blind* is that these writers can’t write because they can’t *see*, a condition that makes them also unable to *think*. They are, in a word, adult children of the mass media, which has been busy for sixty years “teaching” them what’s “real,” what’s “valuable,” and what’s the source of “meaning.” As a result, they see the surfaces of things and *think* they’re seeing *into* the things. They see the pre-fabricated *outsides* of pre-fabricated *things, ideas, and even feelings*, and take them all as real, deep, and true.

And this same thing is exactly what has happened to Dennis Cass, to his students, and to Carleton College itself.

What does a writing teacher like Cass *think* about? Well, obviously not books, not writing—but *brand names*, clothing, “style,” “product.” What do writing *students* think about? Ditto. And so here comes the likes of Cass into the

classroom saying not “Read this book,” not “Study this idea,” not even saying “Read *me*,” or “Study *me*”—but he comes in saying, instead, “*Read my clothes*,” “Read the *brand names and products on me*” and then *tell me what they reveal about “me as a person.”*

And there it is: the corrupted, the ruinous, the anti-intellectual, the de-humanizing reversal, something like the change in direction of an electric current.

The *products* determine *him*, not *he* the *products*.

The meaning of the *products* determines the meaning of *him*—rather than *him* determining the meaning (or the value, or the significance, or the status) of the *products*.

And there we have the grim, pathetic, truth of it: Cass isn’t a writing instructor on the faculty of a major college. No, *here’s* what Cass is: *Cass is a consumer.*



America is not a picky eater: America feeds upon *all* its children. The mass consumer culture, it would seem, the national security state, the corporate-military America—this is a place, a *devouring* machine without control, brakes, or driver, that feeds on Dennis Cass, on Carleton College, on “the new professors” (as *A Nation Gone Blind* calls them) everywhere, at Yale, Harvard, Stanford, the works.

And what of it? Well, all it means is that the nation is doomed intellectually, that the likes of <http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought3.html> Walter Kirn will emerge as today’s dim and prevaricating Shakespeare, that even at places like Carleton the students will say “like,” and even *there* “product” will continue to lead and mind will—maybe not even—follow.

With people like Cass and Kirn, or like the faculty and President and administration of Carleton and all other places like it leading us, what chance *conceivably* do we have of gaining or achieving anywhere *near* a sufficiency of intellectual independence, unity, and strength to *save* ourselves, to regain the now-lost republic, to get habeas corpus back, to impeach, try, and convict Bush and Cheney et alii and prevent <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=CHO20070201&articleId=4659> the nuclear holocaust that they and their vile pals appear determined to provide us as—as what? Let’s say as “dessert” for the wonderful six-year-long banquet of murder, treason, torture, treachery, extreme rendition, and crimes against humanity that they’ve served us *so* far. Isn’t it reassuring to know that in college classrooms all across America the instructors are defining themselves by the inane *clothing* they buy and wear, and that the “like”-saying

*students* are being told to *talk* about those “studded belts” or those “brown-and-teal striped shirts” in order to determine what the clothes say about their professors as people?

As I remember Ted Rall saying at the end of an essay called <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article15283.htm> “The End of the U.S. As a Civilized Nation” and written on the occasion of the passing last October of the War Commissions Act of 2006, “We’re done.”

After all, what on earth *is* a “consumer”? It’s nothin’ good, let me tell you. In fact, the second chapter of <http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593760981/ref=nosim/104-1974668-7081548?n=283155> *A Nation Gone Blind* asks how it *can possibly be* that otherwise normal people could have become—or could have been *made* to become—*willing* to be transformed into consumers from their previous existence as *people*, as *citizens*, as thinking, individual, self-determining, true *selves*. Imagine what it means to be transformed from *that* state into a *consumer*. As *A Nation Gone Blind* puts it, being a consumer is nothing anyone in their right mind could possibly want: “To be a consumer,” it says, “is to be an intaker, devourer, feeder, absorber. It is to be a mouth or a stomach. It is to be an *intestine*.”

Ah, academia, transformed into mouth, intestine! Ah, humanity, transformed into consumer! Ah, Carleton, institution corrupted and lost!

Earlier, I mentioned the State Department’s “what it means to be an American writer” project. One of the writers who appeared in the <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/> resulting book was Naomi Shihab Nye, “whose essay,” I wrote in *A Nation Gone Blind*, “is positively vibrant with banality and cliché (“Have people lived up to their best dreams of what human beings could be? Have we helped one another enough? How often do we really listen to others? . . . Does greed guide too many decisions?”).

Like others in the State Department volume, Nye showed herself to be one of the “adult children of the mass media” that I mentioned before, a person unable to *see*, therefore unable to *think*, and unable thus to *express* real thought. As a consequence, she writes *feelings* while remaining under the blinded *impression* that she is writing *thoughts*:

As she brings her shower of platitudes to a close, Nye describes a multi-ethnic gathering and remarks of it that “This festival feels like a reunion, since we have all met before and read one another’s work and value the power of communication above everything else.” But communication of *what*? Here yet again, in Nye, we have a writer who isn’t a writer but instead is a person concerned with something other than writing, an “issue.” In Nye’s case this “issue” appears to be multi-culturalism, whatever that might really mean. “How various we are,” the author enthuses, “in our eccentric, multi-colored land, our trails dotting so many landscapes, cultures and histories up till now,” with the fairly clear result that, in Nye’s case, it seems to mean nothing more than a *feeling*, not unlike <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/writers/> Elmaz Abenader’s [another contributor]

when she declares that “In addition, I found a community” made up of “American writers and artists of color. . .”

And so the great question—communication of *what?*—finds its answer: of *feeling*.

And what does all this have to do with Dennis Cass, with Carleton College, with the piece in the *Times Magazine*? Clearly, the common thread is *superficiality*. But something more condemning, more disastrous, and more important is this: the common thread is also the blinded *seeing of* the superficial as the *source* of meaning, or even as meaning *itself*.

This quality of being unable to see or think takes on an especially pathetic quality in Nye’s case, when, after dithering away with one hollow cliché after another, she writes the following:

To this day, no one has ever said to me, *You cannot say that thing*. They may have said, *Thank you, but we do not wish to publish this thing*, or, *This thing could certainly be improved upon*, but they have not said, *You cannot say it*.

After that quote from Nye, *A Nation Gone Blind* adds this comment, followed by another quote from Nye:

Immersed in, surrounded by, inhaling, even *wearing* the omnipresent aesthetic of the corporate mass media; being urged by it monthly, weekly, daily, hourly to revel in self-consideration; to put feeling in the place of thinking without knowing or seeing what one has done; to be equally and similarly disoriented and misled by a failed and corrupted academia; to have all this happen to you; to undergo the metamorphosis, as if by some diabolic equivalent of lobotomy, of your intellect itself into a happy little chamber of airy nothingness; to undergo all of this and *then* to show your gratitude by raising childish hymns of thanksgiving for the guarantees of the First Amendment—such a thing evokes not just pathos but hints at the true extent of the danger facing us:

Freedom of speech is the greatest gift America has given us all and I will treasure it forever and continue to remind people about it because sometimes if you have had it forever, you don’t realize you have it.

How pathetic, how sad, how melancholy, how conducive to the abyss of despair is this deferential nod to the first amendment, expressed <http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought1.1.2007.html> in nothing other than baby talk.

Truth is, the first amendment is gone already. Try using it for real and there’s no guarantee—not any more—that you won’t find yourself <http://www.philly.com/mld/dailynews/news/opinion/16219278.htm> in the brig with Jose Padilla, or snatched away between flights <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=32279> like Maher Arar, or, who knows, being made suddenly a <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2006/01/332725.shtml> very happy camper. Just ask Dick Cheney what he’s got in mind. Poke around <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/index.html> Information Clearing House a little

bit. Or make a habit of visiting <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=home>  
The Centre for Research on Globalization. Or read  
<http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought11.4.G.html> some of the books I've  
recommended.

We're goners, we're dead, if we don't get serious.

*Rock & Republic jeans*, for god's sake. Hey, I know what, let's be *writers!*

"If I failed as a teacher, at least my students would think I was cool."

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=CHO20070201&articleId=4659> "The World is at the crossroads of the most serious crisis in modern history. The US has embarked on a military adventure, "a long war", which threatens the future of humanity."

"Their assignment was to say what my clothes revealed about me as a person."

<http://www.ericlarsen.net/foodforthought1.1.2007.html> "All lies all the time—in a word, the American way."

"And far away, in West Tree, in my room, waiting there alone amid the poor and shattered ruins of my knowledge, I peered out, unceasingly and steadily, into the enormity of the long and unwhispering night.)))))" <http://www.abebbooks.com/servlet/SearchResults?an=eric+larsen&y=11&tn=i+am+zoe+handke&bsi=0&x=76&prevpage=3> (—Zoë Handke)

Carleton *College*? What a dump.

—Eric Larsen  
—February 9, 2007

(Excerpts from *I Am Zoë Handke* are reprinted with permission of Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill)