



FAITH





There is no such thing as not worshipping.
Everybody worships. The only choice we get is
what to worship.

David Foster Wallace, *This Is Water*

*This report is not about religion.
It is about what happens to humans when
belief becomes private, unconscious, and
unexamined.
When belief retreats from shared structures
into the individual, when it's no longer
spoken about, practiced together, or morally
negotiated. **It does not disappear, it simply
relocates. Into consumption, identity and
power dynamics.***

**Unconscious belief makes us vulnerable
to narcissism, cruelty, and to systems that
promise meaning without responsibility.**

*It leaves us exposed to authority without
restraint and certainty without humility.
The question, then, is not whether we believe,
but where belief has settled today.*

THIS IS WATER

In 2005, **David Foster Wallace** delivered a commencement speech at Kenyon College that would later become known as *This Is Water*. At its core is a deceptively simple idea: **the most important realities are often the hardest to see, precisely because they are everywhere.**

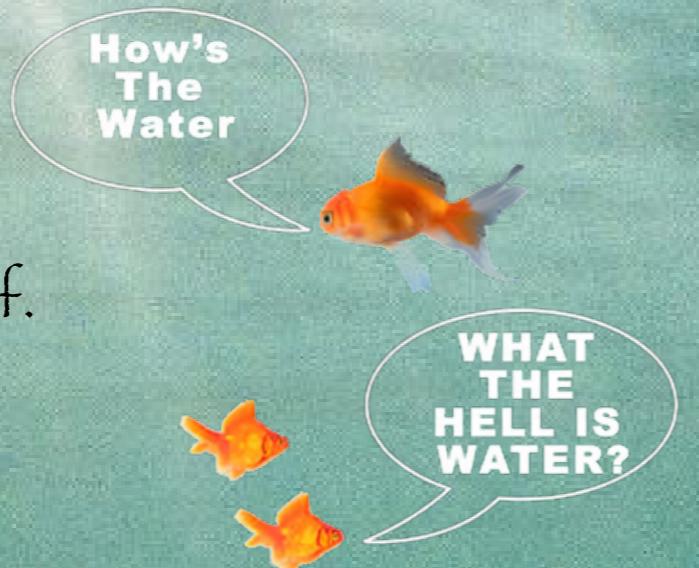
Wallace argues that a real education is not about what to think, but about learning how to think (or more precisely, learning how to notice). Once the structure of education falls away and adult life sets in, **we are all left alone with routines, frustrations, boredom, and desire. In those moments, our default setting quietly takes over.**

That default setting is belief.

Wallace's most radical claim is not spiritual in a traditional sense, but existential: **belief is not optional**. Humans cannot not believe. Our consciousness requires orientation — a way to assign meaning, value, and importance to experience. If belief remains unconscious, it collapses inward. The self becomes the center of the universe. Certainty hardens. Others become obstacles, abstractions, or instruments.

Religion has historically offered one way of making belief visible. Externalizing it through ritual, story, moral constraint, and community. But this capacity is not exclusive to religion. Atheist, secular, and philosophical frameworks can do the same work — if they remain conscious, shared, and ethically grounded.

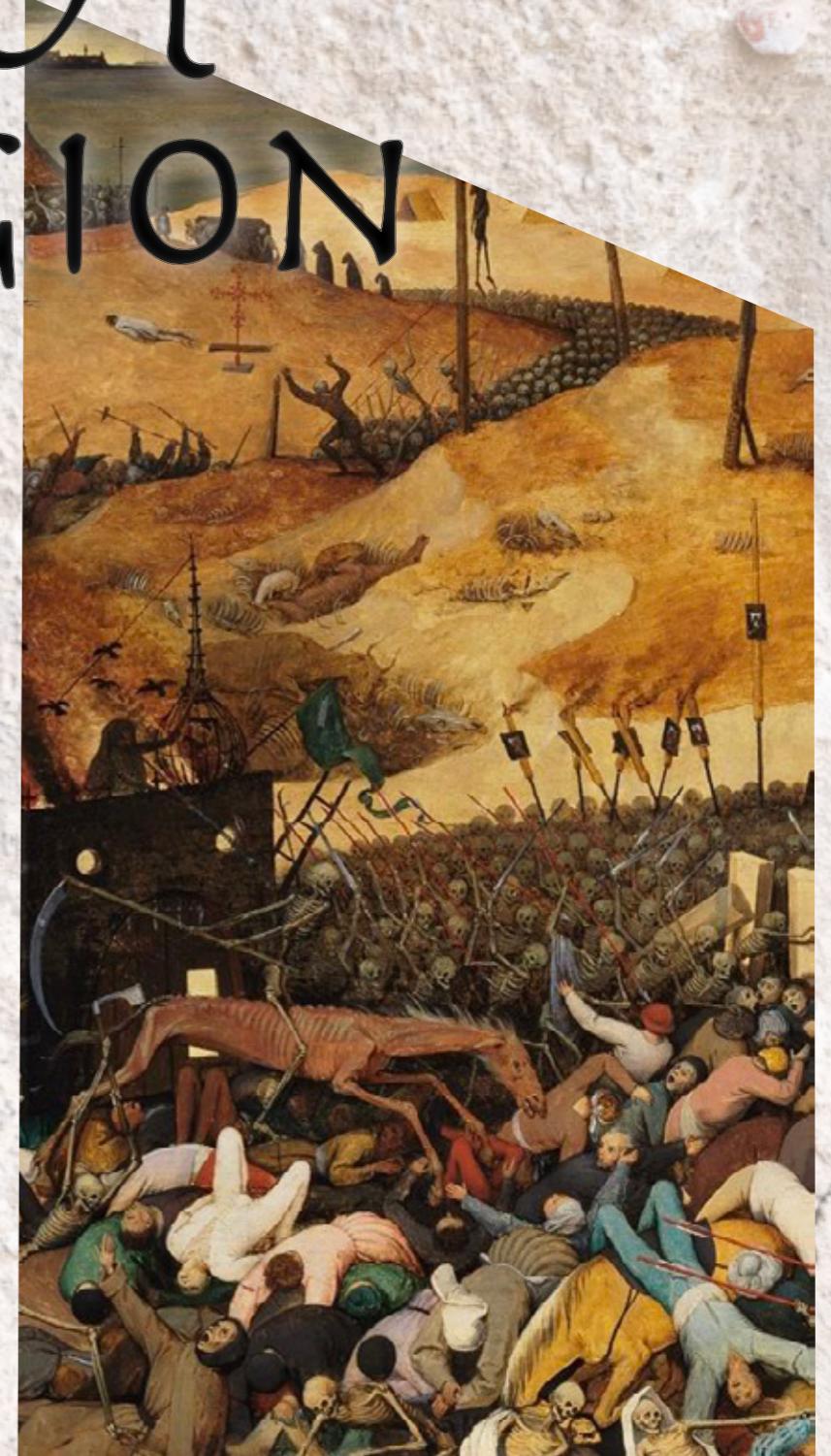
No one stands outside belief. The only question is: do we recognize the water we swim in or do we make it all about ourselves?



ABOUT RELIGION

Belief was not imposed on humans. It emerged from us as a consequence of being able to feel more than we can bear.

Long before religion became institution, doctrine, or power structure, humans were already confronted with the same unavoidable facts that define life today: **bodies decay, children are born into uncertainty, seasons change, loved ones fall ill, and everyone, without exception, will disappear again**. Belief systems arose not as an escape from this condition, but as a way to live inside it.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Triumph Of Death, ca. 1562

Across cultures and centuries, belief systems co-evolved with human societies as shared tools of orientation. They offered narratives that did not deny suffering, but placed it in relation to something larger than the individual. In doing so, they transformed private pain into something collective and aesthetic.

Belief always was more embodied practice and ritual than intellectual narrative. It encompassed fasting and feasting, healing, mourning and celebrating. It acknowledged that no life was exceptional since we're all born into the same frail body. We all share the same dirt.

Artists like **Pieter Bruegel the Elder** and **Hieronymus Bosch** were brilliant in translating their faith aesthetically with intellectual sincerity as well as humor and levity. Their paintings do not present heaven and hell as abstract fantasies imposed by faith, but as **mirrors of human existence itself: labor and leisure, excess and punishment, beauty and grotesqueness, birth and decay unfolding side by side.**



Hieronymus Bosch : Garden of Earthly Delight, around 1490



Historically, belief systems acted as a form of social infrastructure that structured suffering without pretending it could be eliminated. They placed ethical boundaries around desire, accumulation, and domination. **Shame, taboo, and commandments** were imperfect and often abused, but they served a stabilizing function: they **limited how far power could stretch** before it had to answer to something even bigger. Crucially, belief also acted as an equalizer. People still suffered unequal amounts, but everyone was subject to the same fate as long as they walked the earth.

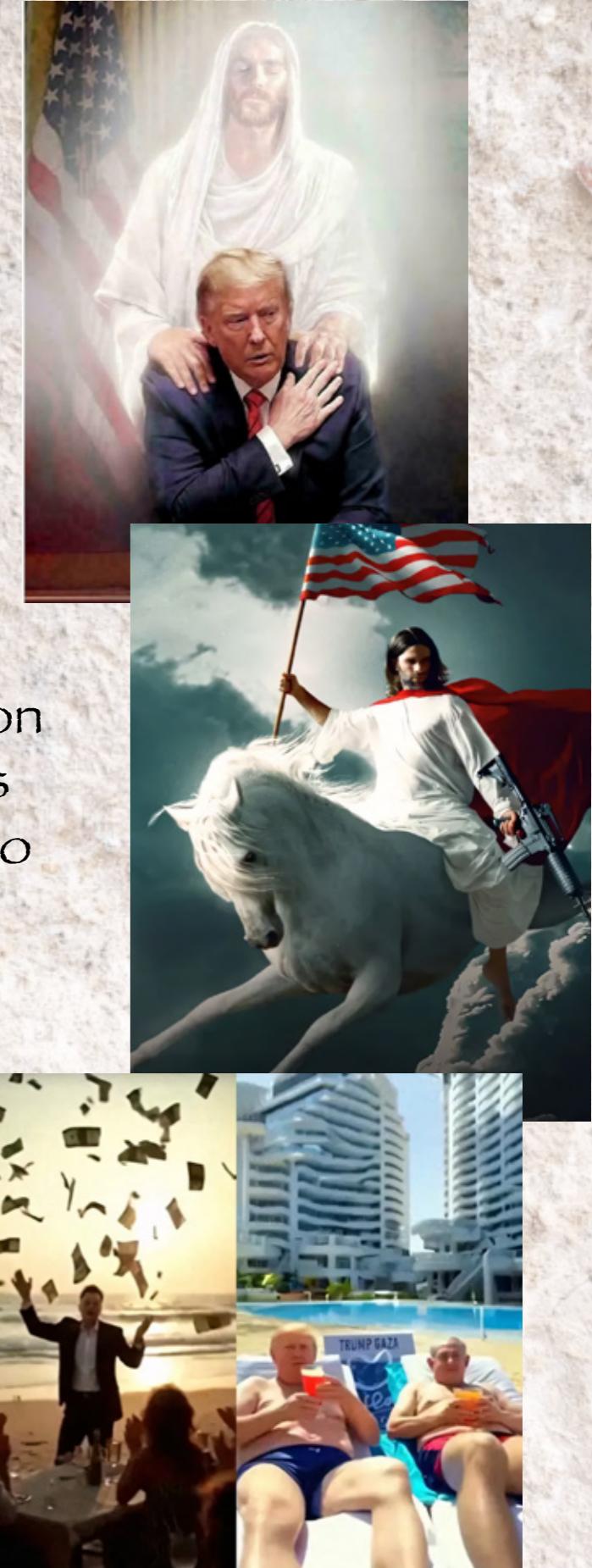
This insistence on shared consequence was never morally pure, but it mattered. When it eroded, it did so in recognizable ways. One of the clearest historical examples is the late medieval Catholic Church, where moral accountability began to fracture along economic lines.

The sale of indulgences effectively allowed the wealthy to purchase relief from punishment for themselves and their families. Salvation became a transaction. **Morality became tiered.** **Martin Luther's theses were a protest against a moral economy in which money had begun to override shared consequence.**

What was at stake was not doctrine alone, but dignity: the idea that no one, regardless of wealth or power, could exempt themselves from guilt, finitude, or ethical responsibility.

The parallel to the present moment is uncomfortable but precise. **Once again, we are living with a system in which consequence is unevenly distributed.** **Economically as well as morally. Those at the top emit more extract more, exploit more, and increasingly answer to less.**

This is not simply inequality. It is moral apartheid: a condition in which shared rules still apply, but only to some.



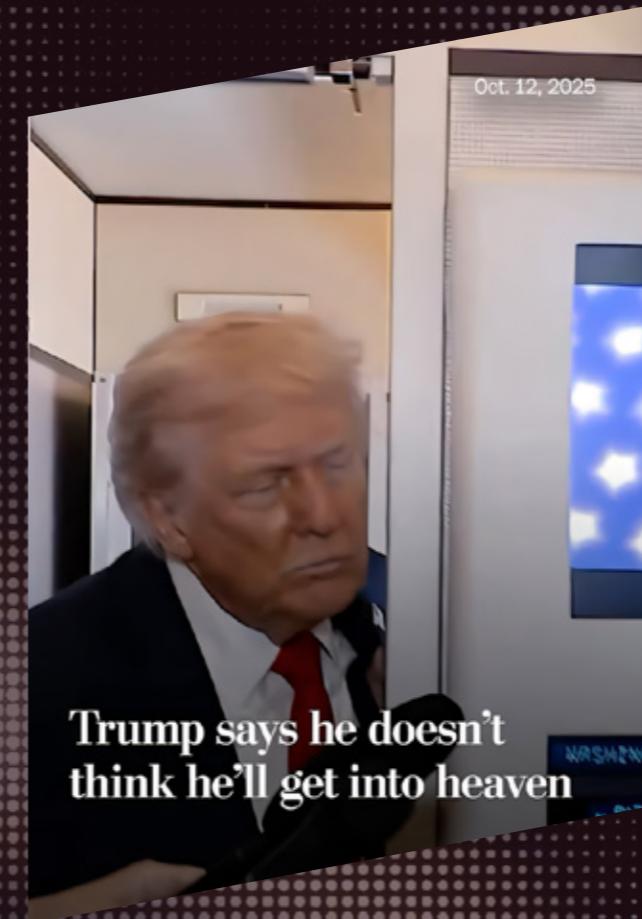
MINING FOR MEANING

Humans are not built to endure meaninglessness. When living standards decline and ethics feel increasingly complex, nostalgia for the simplest hierarchies and clear ideals of "strength" tends to surge. (Yes, center-left politics have failed us—but that is not the focus here.)

We seek structure because we need it. **Institutionalized religions have crumbled over the last century, but their replacement (private, unshared belief) is far more insidious.** It erodes our ability to provoke change by numbing us and turning us against one another.

Belief today circulates as **identity, profound fragmentation of meaning, lifestyle, consumption, and self-definition.** You believe in your sports team, the sanctity of your body, the authority of science, the inevitability of markets, or the emptiness of everything.

These convictions now flow through **algorithms, marketing narratives, and cultural touchpoints, mining for followers, engagement, and relevance.** The result is seamless products, remarkable experiences, powerful economic returns—and a profound fragmentation of meaning.



Social media accelerates this dynamic. It doesn't just connect people; it allows corporations to infiltrate the most earnest conversations, **turning moral convictions into hashtags.** Success is measured in engagement, not truth, nuance, or ethical complexity. Values are hollowed out.

With all of us remaining in our respective echo chambers, our most sophisticated institutions - state, community, culture - have grown brittle. **We are socially divided and morally fragmented, yet economically still extremely efficient consumers (yay).**

After a decade of guilt-driven progressivism around climate, equality, and rights, a backlash has emerged: shamelessness, amplified by the manosphere, provocative podcasts, and ultra-personalized media ecosystems.

One of the most bizarre moments of 2025 came when **Donald Trump, aboard Air Force One, mused aloud that he might not be "heaven-bound."** A fascinating glitch: a mind long detached from shared moral frameworks attempting very awkwardly to map its actions onto a moral universe it has consciously abandoned. Old and new moral orders colliding in real time.

"Tech is not an ordinary industry. The story of tech's success is a story about how human beings understand ourselves in the world — where we get a sense that our existence is meaningful, that our day-to-day lives have purpose."

Greg Epstein, secular ethicist and former humanist chaplain at Harvard and MIT

TECH GODS AND BODILESS ANGELS

In a 2025 opinion piece for *The Conversation*, Associate Professor Charles Barbour of Western Sydney University traces **how religious language has migrated into contemporary technological discourse** — not as casual metaphor, but as a reflection of how meaning and authority are now organised. The shift is subtle but pervasive.

Barbour points to an emblematic moment from Silicon Valley history. In 2015, engineer Anthony Levandowski founded a religious organisation called Way of the Future, **dedicated to the creation and worship of an artificial intelligence "Godhead."** The premise was explicit: a superintelligent AI was inevitable, and reverence might be humanity's best defence against its power

No such deity has arrived. Yet religious rhetoric surrounding technology has only intensified. Artificial intelligence is described as "magical." Industry leaders adopt theological framings: Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI, has described working on advanced AI as being "on the side of angels."

In Tech Agnostic, Greg Epstein argues that technology has effectively become the dominant religion of our time: not merely an industry, but a belief system that offers moral orientation, promises progress, and structures meaning in increasingly fragmented societies



Apple Park, Cupertino, CA

What distinguishes this new religion is its ethical ambition. **Technology does not present itself as neutral.** Corporations and founders issue moral imperatives

"don't be evil," "do the right thing," "make history"

and frame their products as instruments of **collective good and social transformation.** As Epstein notes, the story of tech's success is **inseparable from the story modern societies tell themselves about purpose, virtue, and salvation.**

In this sense, technology does not replace religion so much as absorb its functions. Prophets become founders, salvation becomes optimisation, transcendence is reframed as disembodiment or escape from biological limits. Meaning is no longer negotiated collectively, but delivered through systems so embedded in daily life that they rarely register as belief at all. Technology, then, is no longer just something we use but something we increasingly believe in

If technology has become a belief system, it must also produce recognizable forms of devotion.

Many contemporary pop-cultural phenomena begin to read less like trends and more **like ritual expressions of an underlying faith.** The so-called **clean girl aesthetic**, for instance, presents itself as **neutral, minimalist, and aspirationally "healthy,"** yet functions as a visual theology of purification. The body is rendered smooth, frictionless, odorless, stripped of excess and history. Like an iPhone in human shape, if you will



Another evangelist of this body-defying logic is **Bryan Johnson**, whose brand pushes the clean girl logic to the extreme by **treating death and aging as technical flaws within the human system.**

Johnson's project is not simply about health or longevity; it is about mastery over flesh. The body becomes a site of constant correction, purification, and control. **This is not a scientific experiment but a moral one.**

That this vision feels distinctly American but spreads across the Western world is not incidental. In

The Weirdest People in the World, Joseph Henrich argues that Protestant Christianity rewired Western psychology, producing hyper-individualized subjects trained to **monitor, discipline, and optimize the self from within.**

More extreme American strands like **Mormonism** can be understood not as outliers but as an intensified continuation of this trajectory: **emphasizing cleanliness, discipline, and transcendence over bodily limitation.**

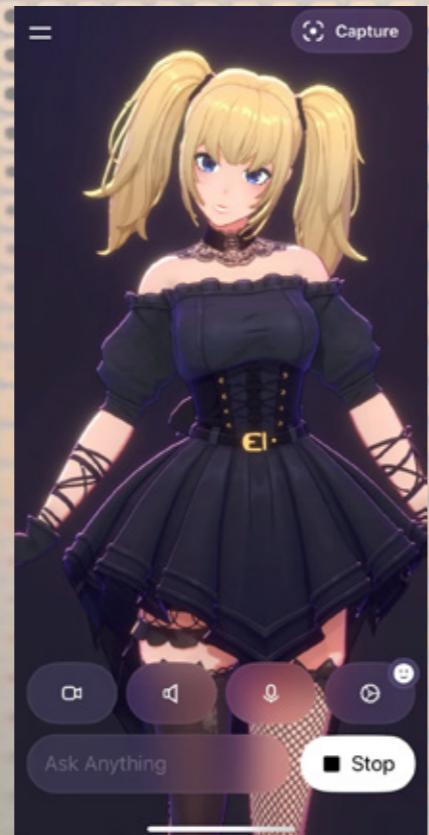
It is therefore noteworthy that **Mormon reality TV shows** have grown popular in recent years (e.g. *Secret Lives of Mormon Wives*, *The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City*). These shows capture the genre-specific entertainment values of drama and chaos but **set against a backdrop of perfectionism, submissive femininity, and aestheticized purity — a formula many viewers are already accustomed to from the Kardashians over the past decade.**

What connects these phenomena is their shared spiritual orientation: a belief in transcendence without surrender, and purity without dirt. Successfully managing your body is the ultimate status symbol. Using it to actually live or even letting it decay is embarrassing. This is the final stage of optimization before we upload ourselves into the cloud altogether.

In religious traditions, angels are imagined without bodies. They don't age, sweat, decay, or grow tired and frustrated. Seen this way, they become a powerful analogy for the clean girl aesthetic .



@kimkardashian 2025



*What are we are trying to escape here?
Dirt, fatigue, illness,
longing to be loved?
Those things don't
disappear, even for
the cleanest of clean
girls.*

When we try to escape them, they accumulate elsewhere. We have outsourced suffering: to bodies deemed inefficient, unclean, or obsolete—the fast-fashion worker, the lithium miner, those who produce our modern conveniences that make us feel far removed from physical and mental dirt.

The world we are being promised is frictionless. But friction is where ethics live. We have become profoundly unprepared to deal with a reality that cannot be optimized away.

To stay with the dirt is the answer; it is not a regression. It is a refusal of false beliefs.

STAYING WITH THE DIRT

Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.

Donna Haraway

What we are currently experiencing feels like the **unraveling of the liberal Western hegemony** - and it's taking democracy right along with it: **grifters taking the reins, and human dignity now is measured along with the size of your wallet**. Many of us wonder how much worse things must become before the pendulum swings back.

Yet even while AI revolutions, clean-girl ideals, and tech gurus are still in full blaze, we can already begin to reclaim human texture as a source of truth and spiritual gravity.

We can prepare for a return of sincerity and empathy, while trying to keep vanity (an all-too-human trait) in check.



The anxiety that accompanies large-scale upheaval and uncertainty is profound. In moments like these, it becomes tempting to trust promises of transcendence: cleanliness, taste cultures, painless, frictionless living. Or to surrender to the loudest, most aggressive leader available. Why is it so difficult to make peace with the texture that makes us who we are, and to remain kind to one another in the process?

Because the dominant economic system we live inside depends on the opposite: on permanent extraction, unequal distribution, and the conversion of human vulnerability into competitive advantage. In such a system, accepting limitation is not rewarded but punished.

Tech has perfected this logic: extracting dirt from the ground and turning it into slick objects and slick narratives of salvation for maximum gain.

So perhaps, as this system hardens into a more aggressive form, **staying with the dirt, spiritually, culturally, politically,** becomes more important than ever.

Not looking at our bodies as *limiting*, nor at history as an *obstacle*, but as *material*: something to work with, to learn from, and to respond to without the puritan mechanics of *shame*.

Managing our *cynicism*, despite the vast availability of disturbing news today.



If we are really honest, human texture is all we have.

Fetishizing purity ends in facism.

There is no clean way out. And that truth can either induce panic, or become deeply empowering.

INSTEAD OF TRYING TO
ERADICATE THE WATER
WE SWIM IN.

CAN WE TRY TO STAY
WITH THE DIRT?



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