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From Our Fall 1975 Issue . . .

## How Will History Judge Us?

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Barbara W. Tuchman

**T**O BEGIN BY WAY OF PARENTHESIS, I should tell you that when [Vice] Admiral [Julian] LeBourgeois [President 1974–1977] invited me to give the Spruance Lecture, I had to tell him that the 14th century in which I have been absorbed for the past four years is not easily adaptable to the purpose Admiral Spruance had in mind. Let me give you a glimpse.

The English Navy at the start of the Hundred Years' War consisted largely of impressed merchant vessels ranging from 40 or 50 to 200 or 300 tons, with square-rigged sails which could not adapt to the wind, and with large holds for cargo, useful for carrying the knights' horses in war but not designed for maneuverability. For belligerent use, the ships were fitted out with "castles" or high platforms from which, at the Battle of Sluys in 1340, longbowmen, wielding England's decisive weapon, dispatched a storm of arrows that won the first important victory of the war. The English Navy decided control of the Channel by means of that contemptible weapon—a projectile which French chivalry disdained as a mean substitute for bodily combat. No one dared tell the outcome of the battle to the King of France until his jester was thrust forward and said,

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Ms. Tuchman (1912–1989) received a B.A. from Radcliffe College and was awarded the degree of doctor of letters from several colleges and universities. In 1937 she became a staff writer and foreign correspondent for the magazine *The Nation* (which her father owned), covering the Spanish Civil War from Madrid; during World War II she was an editor in the Office of War Information. A self-taught historian, the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she was the author of, among other books, *The Guns of August* (1962), *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World before the War* (1966), *The Zimmerman Telegram* (1966), *Stilwell and the American Experience in China 1911–45* (1970), *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978), *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (1984), and *The First Salute* (1988).

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“Oh, the cowardly English, the cowardly English!” and on being asked why, replied, “They did not jump overboard like our brave Frenchmen.” The King evidently got the point. The fish drank so much French blood, it was said afterward, that if God had given them the power of speech they would have spoken in French.

France’s allies, the Castilians, had a professional navy of true warships, that is to say, galleys propelled by oarsmen, which 30 years after Sluys reversed the result and annihilated the English in the two-day Battle of La Rochelle. Being maneuverable, the Castilian vessels were able to ram the square-riggers, with flamethrowers attached to their bows, and from “castles” taller than the enemy’s they threw stones down upon the English archers. Among other losses, the English ship carrying 20,000 pounds in soldiers’ pay was sent to the bottom, to the distress, not to say the extreme disaffection, of the army in Aquitaine. King Edward then assembled a new fleet by the usual means of “arresting” merchant ships, and a new army for the invasion of France, but owing to a technological delay in inventing the swinging boom, his square-riggers were prisoners of a contrary wind, which on this occasion prevailed for nine weeks. Through all that time the fleet never got further than the Isle of Wight, until by the end of October it was too late in the season to go. The expedition had to be abandoned after tremendous expenditure—made up, of course, by increased taxes—and at a cost of interrupted trade and lost profits, loss of control of the Channel, and increasing discontent with the war.

It is a puzzle to me why medieval technology could have conceived the gearshaft of a windmill capable of harnessing the insubstantial air to turn a millstone, yet failed to conceive of the swinging boom capable of using a wind blowing in an adverse direction. By such accident of the human mind are shaped war, trade, and history.

To move on to a more general theme, I have often wished in the last ten years, as our troubles intensify, our bewilderment mounts, and diagnosis and prognosis grow more frenzied, that I could receive a special dispensation to go forward 100 or 500 years hence, just for a day in the library to find out how historians of the future will classify our time. Will it be designated as decline and fall, or turning point, or revolution, or resurgence? Are we agents of a new age, of world federalism perhaps, of interplanetary life, or on the other hand, of Malthusian starvation? And when will we know? Are we on the edge of change or in the midst of a deepening disintegration that has a long way to run? The first half of the 20th century has already been designated by the *Cambridge Modern History* as the Age of Violence. We cannot yet tell whether the second half will be known as the Age That Ruined the Earth or the Age That Walked on the Moon.

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To find clues to the answer, the best way is to stand off and gain some perspective on ourselves by examining human experience in an earlier age of adversity. The process is more useful and certainly more entertaining than the current myopic obsession with the present. It discloses startling parallels which allow one to gain insights into what is persistent in the human race and what is not. Though we may fly and talk to each other through the air and light up the night, we are not very different in essentials from our ancestors who could do none of these things. "For mankind," said Dryden, "is ever the same and nothing lost out of nature, though everything is altered."

There *are* tides in the affairs of men, though not necessarily regular and predictable like the ocean's. A long view of history shows a dynamic time alternating with recession; an age of confidence succeeded by an age of anxiety; the full tide giving way to the ebb. The Roman Republic and early Empire was a dynamic age, dominating and determining events, until it degenerated under the later Empire, collapsed under barbarian assault of the 5th century, and gave way to the Dark Ages of early Christian Europe. There followed the long, slow struggle lasting 500 years toward a new organizing principle under the Church and the emerging feudal system. The turnover to another dynamic period began in the 11th century and entered in the 12th and 13th into the great flourishing of the High Middle Ages, a period of extraordinary development in the rise of towns, of guilds, of urban society, of money and banking and international trade, of geographical and intellectual exploration, of universities, crusades, the compass, the clock, and the windmill, of Magna Carta and Marco Polo, St. Francis and Thomas Aquinas, and, above all, of the soaring and unsurpassed Gothic cathedrals, crown of creativity, technology, and faith.

Then about 1300 the slide began. Population growth outdistanced agricultural techniques, upsetting the balance between number of mouths and means of subsistence. Famine followed, aggravated by a chilling of the climate and by rains and droughts. On top of this, in 1348 came the most lethal disaster in recorded history—so far—the Black Death, an outbreak of bubonic plague that wiped out one-third of the people in the Near East and Europe in three years. Remaining in its unsuspected carriers, rats and fleas, it reappeared locally and sporadically over the next century so that no one ever knew when its horror would strike. Along with it raged an epidemic of war and violence, stemming and spreading from the Hundred Years' War of England against France and, like the plague, leaving no corner of Europe untouched. Simultaneously, the central institution on which men depended to give meaning to life in this world and salvation in the next—the Church—sank into corruption and contempt and then split apart in the papal schism that compounded both. Spiritual solace and guidance eroded when they were needed most. Under the blows of war, taxes,

and religious disaffection, popular anger erupted in waves of revolt, always in vain and savagely suppressed as soon as rulers recovered their nerve.

People of the 14th century were as conscious as we are that human conduct was wrecking society. Yet despite the earnest endeavor of kings, prelates, and universities in many councils and parleys, they could neither end the war nor heal the schism. The one dragged on intermittently for 113 years, the other for 50. "What schal befall hieraefterward, God wot," wrote John Gower despairingly in 1393,

... for now upon this tyde,  
Men se the world on every syde  
In sundry wyse so diversed  
That it welnyh sand al reversed.

The ebb tide lasted for about 200 years, from roughly 1300 to 1500. These are dates of convenience, which someone will instantly dispute, but never mind. Regardless of when the Renaissance began—and you may take the invention of printing in 1465 or the discovery of America in 1492 as signposts—the world entered a new dynamic period which may be said, with halts and ups and downs, to have lasted for about 400 years. It reached a climax in the accelerated burst of the Industrial Age coinciding with that energetic and expansive period extending from the French Revolution and the steam engine to 1914, which is called for convenience the 19th century.

Then begins our time, another disintegration, another 4th or 14th century—the Terrible Twentieth—which is not to say that the machine age stopped, for the ends of eras do not tie off neatly everywhere at once. On the contrary, technology has exploded, but whether the effect of nuclear energy, computers, television, and so forth, with all their implications, has been more beneficial than harmful is now of course disputed. Either way, it is clear that 1914 marked the end of an age of optimism, of tremendous confidence, of belief in progress, and in the perfectibility of man. It has been succeeded by an age of doubt; a sense of human helplessness in the face of runaway events and runaway techniques that seem beyond our power to control. We find ourselves helpless too to contain the brute within us that still springs forth, not in the least tamed by the centuries.

In the place of the splendid Victorian of [William Ernest] Henley's image claiming to be master of his fate and captain of his soul, our image is the anti-hero, a tramp sitting in a ditch waiting for Godot. Or you can choose [Eugene] Ionescu's image of the human species turning itself one by one into that large pig with a horn called Rhinoceros. The artist can sometimes say more than the historian. While I cannot speak for these two authors, their plays represent, I think, the artist's vision of that sense of futility, absurdity, even disgust,

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that pervades man's view of himself in the 20th century. Doubt and disgust raise no cathedrals.

Our self-respect or its absence will be the criterion by which history will judge us. Future historians may modify but will not essentially alter our own estimate. In the great ages men see themselves but a little lower than the angels. They are filled with a sense of infinite capacity, prepared, like David, to kill giants, conquer the world like Alexander, summarize knowledge like Aquinas, or sail the uncharted seas like the Vikings, severed from any connection with home. The hero of Greek tragedy is noble; that is the essence of his tragedy. Ours is in the death of a salesman. We see man as victim—and small, without grandeur or pride, whereas in another age even slaves, sculptured by Michelangelo struggling against their bonds, have an indomitable quality no artist today could duplicate, because he would not feel it.

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***“. . . [The] one sure rule of history: that no one period is all one thing at one time. Historical periods, like the men who live in them, are full of variables and contrary trends.”***

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Ours is an age, judging by its literature, that sees man as the prey of his weaknesses and, on the whole, nasty. Our writers write out of dislike of their species, whom they generally represent as absorbed 19 hours a day in repetitive varieties of sex and sadism. The result is a stunted version of the human kind, for these are not the only concerns that drive us—that moved Mozart, let us say, to compose his music or Washington to hold on through the desperate winter of Valley Forge.

The Middle Ages knew better. They did not consider sex the primary engine. In their rank of sins—and sin meant to them the worldly drives that diverted man from the quest for salvation—they put Vainglory and Avarice, that is, the lust for power, glory, money, even for knowledge and beauty, first. Lechery was just one among others.

In the tormented 14th century, however, as now, the dominant tone was self-disparagement, plus nostalgia for that golden past which always seems to have been better conducted. Eustache Deschamps, court poet of France, scolded and scorned his contemporaries for the greed of knights, the simony of clerics, the idleness and ignorance of the poor, the damnation of war, the fraud of merchants, the quarrels of the Italians, the silliness of fashions, the iniquity of lawyers. He was sure that in the past, “Knights of old and their children went to mass and believed in God, and the common people labored in simplicity, each content with his own place,” but in his own time “vice reigns only.”

Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, believed he lived in the senility of the world when society like some delirious old man suffered from

"fantasies and illusions"—by which he meant the increasing cult of astrology and magic. Like many of his contemporaries he believed the time of Antichrist was at hand, when the world would end in the final challenge of evil, followed by the ultimate triumph of Christ and the Day of Judgment.

The era seemed to its inhabitants an endless succession of disasters. The letters of Francisco Datini, merchant of Prato [Italy], show him living in daily dread of war, famine, pestilence, and insurrection, believing neither in the stability of government nor in the honesty of fellow businessmen. "The earth and the sea are full of robbers," he wrote to his partner, "and the greater part of mankind is evilly disposed." On the other hand, Gaston Phebus, Count of Foix, from his height of privilege and renown, when questioned by the chronicler Froissart for his estimate of the age, said he thought the history of his times would be more sought after than any other, because "in these fifty years there have been more feats of arms and more marvels in the world than in the 300 years before." Froissart himself, the celebrator of chivalry, would have agreed, and not until the end of his life did he recognize the rumble of decay for what it was.

The 14th century was struggling and suffering without advancing, waiting for a spiritual renewal that did not come, and tormented by a general unrest amounting, in the words of Henri Pirenne, "almost to mental confusion." Among its rulers it had no great men, he adds, but only "personalities of the second class," a fact that usually accompanies an age of decline. Nor were the rulers always notable for high ethical standards. They lied then, too. At a time when the pope was trying to arrange peace, he discovered that King Edward III of England, while ostensibly dealing with the King of France, was secretly negotiating behind his back with France's treacherous vassal, the King of Navarre. Rebuked by the pope, Edward denied the charge, in writing, on his "oath as a king," although the tape, excuse me, the *text* of his treaty with Navarre exists.

The 14th century, being nearer to God, ascribed its afflictions to divine punishment for its sins. Here, I think, is a fundamental difference with our time. Medieval people lived intimately with a sense of sin, because its inculcation was essential to the maintenance of Christian doctrine. We, on the other hand, are trying to do without it. We have shed personal responsibility for wrong. Murderers and muggers are considered victims of society; more highly placed lawbreakers are excused as being merely "overzealous." A sense of sin, that is, the recognition of wrong, has been silently dwindling over recent decades like the whooping crane or other endangered species, until suddenly its absence, when revealed in the upper reaches of government, comes into startling visibility. No amount of police, courts, and prisons can make society's controls work if the individual conscience is inoperative.

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A concept of sin did not help the 14th century behave any better than we do because at the same time it was critically aware of the failure and rot of its institutions. Public opinion was turning against the two primary estates, of clergy and nobles, for abusing or failing to perform, or worse, betraying the functions assigned to them in the medieval order. The priest was supposed to pray for human society, the knight to defend it, the third estate to do its work. But a corrupt clergy offered uncertain salvation, while lords and knights, far from defending the common people, oppressed them worse than did the enemy.

Today this phenomenon has been given a name: "deinstitutionalization," which means, I take it, what happens when institutions, hitherto taken for granted, either fail or betray us. Marriage, the hometown, the presidency, public servants, manners and morals, and a normal premise of obedience to rules crumble under our feet. When the certainties go and the framework comes apart, whether in the 14th or the 20th century, people are left loose, which is uncomfortable. Some become alienated; some seek an explanation for the malignance and capriciousness of events in demonology and the occult. Astrology is almost as big today as it was 600 years ago. The 14th century had its sorcerers and black magic; we have exorcism and diabolism and multiple conspiracies and mysterious flying objects, and recently during Watergate we had, you remember, a "sinister force" which oozed in and out of the White House basement removing the files.

Many of the young welcome the collapse of old standards as liberation from what they consider false values. But to be liberated is often to be lost, which perhaps accounts for the sadness often seen in the young. The Middle Ages saw it too. "Alas!" mourned a great troubador, "how miserably thrive the young folk, whose minds once felt no rue! In these days they know naught but care; alas! why go they thus? . . . No man is merry; dancing, singing are all perished for sorrow. . . . The world on all sides is full of ungrace."

Actually that dirge was written in the youth of the 13th century, at the full tide, not the ebb, which only confirms the one sure rule of history: that no one period is all one thing at one time. Historical periods, like the men who live in them, are full of variables and contrary trends.

What is persistent in human behavior, however, keeps reappearing. The Hundred Years' War, despite long periods of truce, was ruinously expensive, like some we have known, piling up costs unheard of before, and necessitating year after year of extraordinary taxes. When these failed to bring in enough money to keep men in arms for extended periods, the kings resorted to debasement of coinage, distorting the economy and defrauding the public.

Brutality became endemic. During truces, when soldiers were released to avoid the necessity of paying them, they formed mercenary marauding bands called Free Companies, which became the scourge of Europe. They wrecked



and ravaged the countryside, pillaging, burning, killing, torturing peasants for a hidden store of grain, holding cities to ransom for gold. Impossible to contain or control, they represented armed force gone wild, not unlike our respectable Army Corps of Engineers as it sweeps over the country, bulldozing human habitations and nature's arrangements impartially, with the same medieval recklessness of result.

If our age is touched with lunacy, it is not the first time. Adversity rendered the 14th century slightly crazy, in the opinion of Jules Michelet, whom some think France's greatest historian and I sometimes think was slightly crazy himself, although capable of brilliant perceptions. His verdict on the 14th century was, "If wisdom consists in self-knowledge and peace of mind, no epoch was more naturally mad." He spoke too soon. What of an epoch that keeps adding highways and abandoning railroads when enlightened self-interest dictates the reverse? What of a people who use precious and dwindling fuel to heat buildings in winter to 80 degrees because 60 is too cold, and cools them in summer to 60 degrees because 80 is too hot? What of a labor force that by its unending demands puts out of business the source of its jobs? What of that extremity of deterrence, Mutual Assured Destruction, and its blunt acronym, M-A-D, MAD? We seem to have pinned a label on ourselves in case some future Michelet should need a hint.

What of the military today? I am about to make myself unpopular, but the question must be asked. Your function, no less than that of 14th-century knights, is the protection of your country and fellow-countrymen and, in a broader sense, of our way of life, that is, the free democratic society established by our Constitution, which most of us believe in and want to maintain. I have no doubt that individually every member of the armed services conceives of himself as performing this function, and when called upon does perform it, at the risk of his life. But collectively the armed services have become a gigantic boondoggle of weaponry that is wasting the national substance on a supererogatory arsenal of overkill. Trident, multiple warheads, there is no need to list them; you know the items better than I do. How much do they want? We already have more than enough, in Churchill's terrible phrase, "to make the rubble bounce."

The argument is always made that arms manufacture gives employment, which is true but hollow, because if the same amount of money now spent on defense, cost overruns, and subsidizing Lockheed and its fellows were spent instead on unpolluting lakes and rivers, building sewage plants, converting garbage to fuel, developing solar and other new sources of energy, creating mass transportation, cleaning the streets, educating against litter, improving and replenishing schools, libraries, museums, parks, and public gardens, subsidizing orchestras, theaters, artists, even writers—who, I like to think, are no less

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deserving than Lockheed—then just as many and far more socially productive jobs would be created and supported.

The argument is also made that keeping ahead of the opponent in sophistication, not to say sheer weight of weaponry, is essential for deterrence. This sounds logical but for the fact that deterrence has become a self-perpetuating game which everybody plays and nobody can ever win—because nobody, in the opinion of this historian, will ever succeed in fixing deterrence upon a basic principle that will invariably apply. Deterrence lies not in surface-to-air missile sites but in the seat of the emotions, wherever that is; in the conditions of the moment, the mood, and the players—in short, in the nerve and the heart. The motto I put on the flyleaf of *The Guns of August*, from the *Marechale de Saxe*—“The heart is the starting point of all matters pertaining to war”—is as true as it ever was. Look at the Middle East. You can play out deterrence ever so many times on your computers like Kipling’s Painted Jaguar trying to figure out the strategy of Hedgehog and Tortoise (“Can’t curl but can swim, slow-and-solid that’s him”), but the event will take you by surprise as it did him. You cannot program a computer for the unexpected.

The only workable deterrence, it seems to me, is a society felt by its citizens to be so desirable that they will spring to its defense and be ready to pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to preserve it. I doubt if we have that condition today, for multiple reasons of which one is certainly the insatiable appetite of the defense establishment. Like the warrior caste of the 14th century, it is not protecting society but aiding its disintegration, because it is spending our resources on sterile hardware instead of on the things that make life richer and give us a society worth defending. As long as these spending priorities remain upside down, I do not see how we can rebuild a system sufficiently valued by its citizens to present a built-in deterrent to an enemy.

In the 14th century the financing of war became as disruptive a factor as war itself. At that time the functions of the state, including the military, had expanded far beyond any regular means of state finance. In theory, taxation was still supposed to be an extra or emergency measure for defense of the realm, requiring consent and terminating as soon as the emergency passed. Since military effort, offensive or defensive, was almost incessant during the Hundred Years’ War, its financing by means of subsidies, sales taxes, salt taxes, import and export duties, and every other conceivable means of raising money exerted heavy pressure and excited resistance, class antagonism, and open revolt. Money was not begrudged for defense of the realm; what aroused wrath was the increasing spectacle of misspent money, money contributed by the commons which they saw embezzled by corrupt officials, dissipated by the nobles on frivolities and extravagance, or wasted on inept battles and vain campaigns. True, the insurrections—in Ghent and Florence and Paris and the Peasants’ Revolt

in England—were invariably crushed, but that did not help to weld the loyalty of citizens to the state. True, there were other causes of alienation: recurring plague, the byproducts of war in brigandage and lawlessness, and principally, I think, the accelerating loss of confidence in the Church. But the financing of what had become a profitless militarism was as destructive as any of the 14th century's other afflictions.

We too are beset by afflictions. I am not saying that the disproportionate allocation of our resources to weaponry is the source of our trouble, but rather that, by putting the wrong things first, it is a self-defeating means of national defense. The Secretary of Defense can get all the hardware he wants—that is, if he can get Congress to give it to him—but it will be useless if in the process he loses the country's will to defend itself.

It is not weaponry that determines who prevails in war, but will. That is a factual, not a sentimental, statement, as I believe many of you who have seen active service would agree. Look at Hanoi. Morale is to material as three to one, said Napoleon, who was no sentimentalist; nor was [Marshal Ferdinand] Foch, who considered it the primary factor. Admittedly, wars can be lost for lack of weaponry (which is hardly our problem), but piling up mountains of missiles can never substitute for morale. To rely on material superiority for either security or victory is the most dangerous mistake a military establishment can make. If it does not work, as it did not in Vietnam, then morale collapses, and what have you left? Perhaps an electric fence to keep the enemy out, as Mr. McNamara thought was the way to win a war in Asia. Everyone has his favorite lesson to draw from Vietnam, but if there is one that should be indisputable, it seems to me, it is that the American obsession with materiel is worse than a sin—it is folly.

The value American citizens put upon their society is our first line of defense—and maybe our last. That is where the defense establishment, and indeed all government, should be putting its attention. You and I may value our system, at least relative to any other society, but all of us know people, especially among the young, who do not. From the same kind of erosion, if I may draw another parallel from the 14th century, the medieval, which is to say the Catholic, church never recovered. Its absorption in money, tithes, property, and charging fees for every spiritual service; its quarrels, wars, and worldly enterprises; and its deafness to the cry for reform lost it what we now call credibility—not among all believers, to be sure, but in enough to break the Church apart in the Protestant revolt. That was not necessarily a bad thing, but I am not ready to consider that an analogous breaking apart of our political system, amid the surrounding totalitarian wolves, would be anything but a total loss.

Our age must cope, of course, with two new elements not present in the Middle Ages: overpopulation with its consequence, pollution; and the capacity

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to annihilate ourselves by the bomb. As to the first, it appears that the birth rate in the developed countries is tending to stabilize, while in the undeveloped countries it is not. There the Malthusian tragedy has already started. As to pollution, we in the West have the means and knowledge to control it, but so far not the necessary enlightened self-interest. We could turn garbage into fuel and substitute moving sidewalks or monorails for cars in the cities any day we liked, but we don't do it because the oil lobby and the automobile lobby exert a greater influence than the public. Or perhaps the fault is in the apathy of the public, as in the year 1404 when penalties were decreed for throwing refuse into the Seine, because, to quote the ordinance, the river "is so full of dung, rubbish, ordure, putrefaction and garbage that it is a great horror and abomination to see, and a great marvel that human beings using the water do not suffer incurable sickness and death." Judging by three such ordinances in four years, people then, too, could not be made to worry about engulfment by garbage until it climbed up the riverbank to their doorsteps.

As to the bomb, I do not think it will go off, for the same reason that poison gas was not used a second time—it blows back. In other words, for fear of mutual assured destruction.

For all its troubles, the 14th century was not devoid of contribution. Looking back we can see a historic movement taking shape in the sentiment of nationalism, soon to become the active organizing principle of the modern world in place of universality, the failed dream of the Middle Ages. The question is now whether nationalism has run its course and whether out of the muddle of our time some new organizing principle, still invisible to us, may be struggling to be born.

You may justly complain that I have supplied no answers. Has the historian nothing to offer? I can suggest a possible clue. Turn back to the oldest foundations, the Old Testament, and to the strange prolonged wandering of the people of the Exodus in the wilderness. Why did they take 40 years to cover a distance of 150 miles? There is wisdom in the legend. The journey to a promised land is full of twists and turns, doubling back, blind alleys, and lost directions. It was so then, and it is so now.

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