

## Chapter 1

# The “Quinn Method” of Cultural Criticism

### *Memes, Martian Anthropology, and Maieutics*

I mentioned in the prologue that Quinn constructs a mosaic the image of which is intended to help us see axioms such as the following for the dubious claims they are: putting food under lock and key reflects the one right way to live; the people of our culture are what humanity was meant to become; there’s such a thing as “the environment” that’s somewhere *out there*; and we humans are inherently flawed. Other such claims emerge in this chapter and the next. Were Quinn a professional philosopher, perhaps he’d prosaically but methodically give reasons to reject these claims. Taken together, his reasons presumably would constitute a well-developed justification of his position. His argument would be subject to its fair share of criticism, of course. Being able to stand up to scrutiny is a necessary condition for justificatory success. Assuming that his reasons and the way they support the construction of his mosaic hold up, the “force of the better argument” would be in a position to win the day. Ideally, the strength of Quinn’s argument would leave many readers itching to do their part to save the world.

If only it were so straightforward. Argumentation can be quite an effective tool when the stakes of acceptance or rejection of the conclusion on offer are relatively low.<sup>1</sup> But saving the world—a high-stakes affair if there ever was one—requires enacting a new story, living according to a different vision of ourselves and our place in the order of things (I, 41). We must undergo a sweeping change of mind. Argumentation alone isn’t typically a powerful enough tool for the task at hand, Quinn contends (Q&A, 600, 629, and 650; see also Powers 2018, 336). Changing minds requires a fuller repertoire of strategies.

I begin by exploring in greater depth what Quinn means by having a changed mind and why it's vital for playing a salient role in saving the world. Next, I discuss Martian anthropology, a key (if oddly labeled) part of Quinn's method for identifying questionable background assumptions that serve to perpetuate Taker culture. I then focus on Quinn's use of maieutics, a specifiable form of dialogue among characters in several of his novels. Quinn regards maieutics as a particularly important narrative tool for cultural criticism. It's intended to help bring to full consciousness ideas about which readers are only dimly aware. This permits us to better understand how we're prevented from living well on our own considered terms and why enacting a new story can alleviate this state of affairs. Lastly, I address Quinn's call to become someone who can awaken others to the axioms we live by. This is key to the threefold struggle. If the world is to be saved, minds must change. If minds are to change, we must become invested in stories that work for people and the planet. Capable teachers—in all walks of life—play a critical role in this process.

### From Old Minds to New

Perhaps the best place to start to explain more fully the character and importance of a changed mind is to draw on Quinn's discussion of *memes*, a term coined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* that has since taken on a life of its own in social media. This will give us a better sense of the difference between what Quinn calls *old minds* and *new minds* and why, on his account, having a new mind is the most powerful weapon not just to hasten the collapse of Taker culture but also to help facilitate the emergence of a culture that works in its wake.

#### MEMES

According to Dawkins, a meme is “a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*” (1989, 192). The term derives from *mimesis*, or more specifically from *mimeme*, Greek for imitation and imitated thing, respectively. Memes operate as replicators, something they have in common with genes. Genes replicate hereditary data, which are transmitted from body to body over generations via sexual reproduction. Memes replicate ideas and are transmitted from mind to mind both within and across generations via linguistic communication.

Dawkins provides the following example to illustrate how the transmission of memes works:

If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. . . . When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme’s propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell. (Ibid.)<sup>2</sup>

Not all memes go viral, of course. Most don’t possess the requisite infectiveness, contagiousness, communicability, or what Malcolm Gladwell calls “stickiness” (2000, 25) to trigger an outbreak. For this to happen, a meme must transfix us. It must dominate our attention and overshadow rival memes.

This is an especially difficult task when it comes to the dissemination of new memes, since the meme pool that constitutes the whole of a culture “comes to have the attributes of an evolutionarily stable set,” states Dawkins (1989, 199). Established memes have inertia, or the force of habit, behind them. So the new memes must be of such “great psychological appeal” (ibid., 193) that established memes by which we’re currently parasitized pale in comparison.

### *Concerns and Qualifications*

A number of scholars question whether memetics has the explanatory or predictive power we’ve come to expect of genetics, hence whether the analogy Dawkins offers is sufficiently salient. Others suggest that memetics is little more than a poor knockoff of semiotics, the study of signs and symbols and their communicative function, dressed up in the language of genetics to look more reputable. Tim Lewens offers a version of both criticisms, focusing the bulk of his attention on the first.

Lewens notes that while genes make copies of themselves, memes don’t. People certainly do influence one another, but there’s no clear evidence to support that this is caused by identifiable idea-replicators reproducing themselves in a new host (2007, 206f.; see also Hull 2001, 98). Moreover, the spread of a gene through a population occurs because it

confers reproductive success on its bearers. This may happen with memes, but it also may not. A tune may catch on simply because its producers or distributors are “powerful enough to make it ubiquitous” (ibid., 208), not because it does much of anything for its hosts. Lastly, Lewens highlights that the way memeticists tend to describe the operation of memes conflates concepts that geneticists hold separate. Memes are said to function like genotypes (that which is replicated) *and also* like phenotypes (the composite of an organism’s physical characteristics, that which experiences selection pressure). This would be quite a feat of self-transformation, were it possible. The weight of the evidence suggests that it’s not.

Mary Midgley expresses dissatisfaction with two further characteristics of memes, particularly as Dawkins describes them. First, she contends that Dawkins thinks of memes as “fixed, distinct natural units” (2003, 93). They’re the ultimate particles of thought and culture. So a proper understanding of culture involves viewing it as divisible into discrete parts, and a proper understanding of thought involves viewing it as atomistic in function. Second, Midgley alleges that Dawkins regards memes as having a life of their own beyond what you or I or any individual can control, so they function as “alien puppet-masters previously hidden from us but revealed now as the true causes ruling our life” (ibid., 70). This invites fatalism, since it insinuates that we’re unable to change the way we think.

Quinn’s appeal to memetics takes place in *Beyond Civilization*, which was published during the height of scholarly interest in the subject—roughly, the mid-1990s through the early 2000s. On reflection, I suspect he’d find Lewens’s challenge compelling. It’s likely, too, that he’d partially agree with Midgley. But this doesn’t mean we need to give up on memes altogether.

Midgley describes customs and norms as “organic parts of human life, constantly growing, developing, changing, and sometimes decaying like every other living thing. Much of this change, too, is due to our own action, to our deliberately working to change them” (2003, 66). Quinn would agree (as do I). So, rather than being discrete units, let memes serve as proxies for *patterns of movement* in thought, much like roughly discernible ocean currents. We’ll see in due order that this fits well with other aspects of Quinn’s philosophy. Quinn would hold the line, though, against Midgley’s assertion that the “true causes” of our destructive tendencies aren’t memes but “conflicting motives” or “warring parts of ourselves” that arise from the “human tendency to self-destructiveness” (ibid., 72). This is simply another way of proposing that we’re inherently flawed.

In reply to Lewens, it’s worth noting that memes have a folkloric component that can be retained even if we abandon the gene analogy

(Oring 2014a and 2014b). Folklorists attend to the ways in which customs, traditions, stories, and artistic practices are passed from one person to another and from one generation to the next. The study of folklore in particular focuses on how communities both retain and also subtly transform what’s passed on.<sup>3</sup> So why not go ahead and think of memes as patterns of folkloric movement? Or, for our purposes, they can be patterns of formation, perpetuation, and transformation of the stories we enact.

### *Lethal Memes*

We Takers, particularly in commercialistic societies, perceive our own culture as dynamic because we encounter numerous memes that are highly volatile. Fashion and music (and scholarly) trends come and go with amazing regularity. New diet fads emerge and disappear every few months, it seems. What’s the “new black” today? We can barely keep up. “Nonetheless,” Quinn notes, “there is a central core of culturally fundamental memes that we’ve been transmitting with total fidelity from the foundation of our culture ten [actually twelve] thousand years ago to the present moment” (BC, 32). Much like alcoholism, some of these memes are lethal for us—not instantly, no, but eventually (B, 154)—including each of the axioms we’ve already identified. They precipitate our extinction and the extinction of millions of fellow species.

Memes don’t disappear just because they’re lethal. Indeed, their lethality has taken twelve millennia to become fully evident. They’re at the core of our culture because they’ve proven to be particularly sticky. Part of what makes them sticky is that there are all sorts of institutions at work, personified by what Quinn calls *Mother Culture* (WS, 67), that prevent us from seeing them as lethal, if we see them at all.

Every culture has its own set of mechanisms that nurture and sustain the story the people of that culture enact, Ishmael tells Julie (MI, 28). What’s unique about *our* Mother Culture is that she nurtures and sustains a message that’s not just lethal for our culture—this has happened before—but lethal for much of life on Earth.<sup>4</sup> Also unique, Quinn contends, is the extent to which her message has been absorbed and internalized not just by those who overtly benefit (for now) from exploiting the planet and other people but also by many Takers who are exploited. Takers both with and without socioeconomic status take most or all of Mother Culture’s message at face value, as the “way things are” (I, 218, and MI, 172). Furthermore, as odd as it may seem, the memes that Quinn identifies as lethal are precisely those that people without changed minds construe as

what make human beings so special and our culture so remarkable. This is what makes them so dangerous.

Belief in Mother Culture's messaging isn't required. Even if you or I or anyone in particular rejects the ideas we live by, we must still live within such a cultural nexus if we're to be fed. How, then, does one play a role in killing a lethal meme? Quinn expands on Dawkins's contention that meme killers champion competing memes that have greater psychological appeal than at least some of the memes that constitute one's current set. He emphasizes that this is most readily possible when people are looking for or are open to a better story (Q&A, 161). Rather than simply working to reveal how and why the way we currently live doesn't work, offering such a story is necessary to change minds.

Note that for a culture (or a subculture, as suggested by the following quote) to collapse and for another to emerge in its place, not all of its core memes must be replaced simultaneously. As Quinn asserts, "To produce the Renaissance, it wasn't necessary to change out ninety percent of the memes of the Middle Ages—or eighty or sixty or thirty or even twenty. And the new memes didn't have to come into play all at once. Indeed, they *couldn't* have to come into play all at once" (BC, 23; see also Brown 2017, 20ff.).<sup>5</sup> New means of living and making a living are composed bit by bit, meme change by meme change. Seemingly insignificant modifications, especially as they accumulate, can turn out to have significant effects (WS, 95).

This suggests that any one of us can spark the sort of viral outbreak that facilitates cultural collapse (IS, 45, and WS, 180). As anthropologist Robert Kelly remarks, "in any given culture, at any given time, each individual represents slight variations on a cultural theme. . . . Culture change is change in the frequency of these variants" (2013, 37). This doesn't mean, though, that it takes only one person to make a change, particularly when it comes to something as colossal as enacting a new story. Ta-Nehisi Coates rightly identifies this is yet one more lethal meme (2015, 96f.), and Quinn agrees. Anyone may transform the meme pool. But major obstacles confront us. This is why Coates defends the proposition that those committed to enacting a story that works are called to *struggle*—his term for engaging in the process of changing minds—not because we're assured of being difference makers but because it can help to keep us sane and resilient under adverse, even oppressive, conditions. This, I dare say, is required to see lethal memes for what they are and to search for ways to make them less sticky.

## THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW MINDS

According to Quinn, old minds are minds that replicate the lethal memes specifically of our culture. New minds reflect the replacement of these memes with ones that foster enacting a story that facilitates ecological, social, and personal wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> Consider these contrasts:

Old minds think: *How do we solve these problems?*

New minds think: *How do we make happen what we want to happen?* (BC, 187–88)

Old minds think: *How do we stop these things from happening?*

New minds think: *How do we make things the way we want them to be?* (Ibid., 8)

Old minds think: *If it didn't work last year, let's do MORE of it this year.*

New minds think: *If it didn't work last year, let's do something ELSE this year.* (Ibid., 9)

Notice that old minds—shorthand for *people* with old minds—tend to get stuck in a pattern of trying to deal with issues as they arise. Their priority is putting out fires. New minds are more proactive. They concentrate on developing ways of thinking and acting that work well in general and on the whole without having to need to worry so much about putting out fires.

Seeing and understanding the difficulties we face here and now is hardly immaterial. Accounting for these difficulties is a necessary condition for making happen what we want to happen. But Doug Brown emphasizes that to change minds, “critical awareness is not enough, because although people see what's wrong, if they don't have a realistic vision of what can replace it, then they are subject to demobilization—despair, cynicism, resignation” (2009, 130). From Quinn's perspective, this is precisely why the revolutionary spirit of the 1960s fizzled.

## PROGRAMS AND VISIONS

“If there are still people here in two hundred years, they won't be *thinking* the way we do,” Quinn states WS, 172–73; see also Scranton 2015,

19). Their lives and livelihoods will reflect a new vision—a new story. So must ours, in short order, if we're to find ways to mitigate accelerating ecocide.

If old minds countenance the prospect of our imminent extinction at all, they assume that we can prevent it through the implementation of new programs. But so long as we maintain our current vision, all the new programs in the world can't save us (B, 48, 51, and 91). This is because programs function *within* a vision. They're the product of visions. So we can't expect them to be sufficiently transformative. No, we need a vision that “works so well that programs are superfluous,” Quinn asserts. Such a vision “works so well that it never occurs to anyone to create programs to make it work” (BC, 10).<sup>7</sup>

Policies to address global climate change—pricing carbon and taxing emissions, funding renewable energy sources, and setting automobile fuel efficiency standards—are programs. Recycling is a program. So is bioengineering microbes to eat into oceanic garbage patches. This by no means entails that they're useless or shouldn't be pursued, Quinn insists. His point instead is that they aren't sufficient to save the world, even taken together:

There are many programs in place today that are staving off our death—programs to protect the environment from becoming even more degraded than it is. Like the first aid in [an] ambulance, these programs are essential but ultimately inadequate. They're ultimately inadequate because they're essentially reactive. Like the medics in the ambulance, they can't make good things happen, they only make bad things less bad. They don't bring into being something good, they only drag their feet against something bad. If there's no hospital at the end of the road, the patient in the ambulance will die, because first aid (useful as it is) just doesn't have the capacity to keep him alive indefinitely. If there's no new vision for us at the end of the road, then we too are going to die, because programs (useful as they are) just don't have the capacity to keep us alive indefinitely. (BC, 18)

Again, that programs are essentially reactive doesn't make them worthy of rejection. But it does mean “that they always follow, never lead (because they only react to something else)” (B, 51). There would be no need for them otherwise. And when they fail to do anything more than



serve as Band-Aids old minds pin the blame on “poor design, lack of funds and staff, bad management, and inadequate training” (BC, 9)—namely, anything other than the vision from which they arise.

“By contrast,” Quinn continues, “vision doesn’t wait for something to happen, it pursues something desirable. Vision doesn’t oppose, it proposes. It doesn’t have to stave off defeat, it opens the way for success” (ibid., 52). Visions thus are self-sustaining. They take no effort on our part to perpetuate. Isolation coupled with the illusion of self-reliance—a separate home or flat for each nuclear family with locks on doors; having no need or desire to rely on or even know one’s neighbors (McKibben 2010a, 133); “bowling alone,” to use Robert Putnam’s (2000) catch-all term for our withdrawal from collective forms of engagement—is a product of our culture’s vision. So is the Industrial Revolution. “No one had to ‘take action’ to make it happen—no one had to pass laws requiring people to be inventive” (WS, 135).

So whereas a vision is like a river, programs are like sticks driven into the riverbed that are meant to impede or channel its flow (B, 49). The vision underlying Taker culture, its direction of flow, is toward catastrophe. Indeed, it’s been catastrophic since its inception, Quinn insists, in terms of its ongoing ill effects on the planet and people. This is why a new direction of flow is required. “With the river moving in a new direction, people wouldn’t have to devise programs to impede the flow, and all the programs presently in place would be left standing in the mud, unneeded and useless” (B, 52; see also BC, 8).

#### IS CHANGING MINDS ENOUGH?

Sure, you may reply, changing minds is all well and good. But it can’t possibly be sufficient to save the world. Quinn agrees, but he regards this sort of challenge as shortsighted. “This is rather like saying that getting elected president is not enough. Changing minds (and getting elected) is where it *begins*. The fact that it isn’t where it *ends* doesn’t make it inadequate” (Q&A, 548).

But maybe what you want from Quinn is a definitive plan of action. He refuses, though, to offer anything that looks like a step-by-step primer for how to succeed in facilitating the emergence of a new vision (WS, 178). Social change is frequently unpredictable. Those who claim to have a clear-cut blueprint for it are rarely worth listening to, he contends. They’re engaging in prophecy, which tends to be attractive to old minds but is basically useless for developing new ones (I, 85f., P, 160f., and BC, 116).

For Quinn, then, there can be no set of instructions for how to get from *here* to *there* if we don't yet have a clear sense of what *there* looks like. All we can do is start *here* and see what works to give us a chance to have a *there*. This is Quinn's concern: not what *there* must be or how we're to arrive at it but how we can foster a *here* that makes possible coming up with a story that facilitates a *there*.

At the same time, Quinn asserts that we shouldn't overlook "that changing minds *is* a 'real plan'—and the only plan we are going to have" (Q&A, 64; see also B, 77, WS, 180, and "Just Talk"). It "may not seem like a very dramatic or exciting challenge, but it's the challenge that the human future depends on" (WS, 180). Discussion and deliberation certainly have their place ("Thoughts on Dialogue"). Along with lecturing, these are often what come to mind when we consider what it means to *teach*, Quinn's go-to term for engaging in the enterprise of changing minds. Indirect forms of resistance may work. More direct forms of resistance against those who currently benefit most from the perpetuation of our culture can count as teaching moments, too.

But one aspect of Quinn's position is in need of immediate correction, or at least clarification. "*What people THINK is what they DO,*" he declares. "*To change what people DO, change what they THINK*" (IS, 44; see also McCluney 2004, 285). The first statement strikes me as correct. Thought and action typically coincide. This doesn't mean that people are always completely aware of why they do what they do. The point instead is that people's actions can be taken to be reflective of their background assumptions.

What about the second claim? To change what people do, change what they think. Alter people's background assumptions, and how they act is transformed. Sure, this happens. But is it not also the case that changing what people do can change their background assumptions? Can't we change how people think by changing what they do? I think so, because I'm a case in point. Many recovering alcoholics I know have some sort of epiphany that leads them to seek recovery. We see ourselves and our actions differently and seek help as a result. A new action follows from a new insight. So far, so good for Quinn's claim.

But once in recovery things work very differently. The achievement of long-term sobriety starts with changing entrenched habits: whom one associates with, where one goes and doesn't go, what one spends one's evenings and weekends doing, and so forth. All we can do at first is to alter our actions so that we don't put ourselves in situations in which we

can act on what our minds insist that we do, which is to have that drink. With time and effort, our actions develop into habits. What we think catches up with what we do. Our brains develop new neural pathways that support our new habits, which makes staying sober easier. We’re no longer constantly battling with ourselves.

Why is this important? If it’s the case that the relationship between changed minds and changed actions is unidirectional (a change of mind changes actions, but not the opposite), then we shouldn’t expect that *living differently* before we’re fully committed to living differently can change minds. This strikes me as limiting, and it doesn’t fit well with other aspects of Quinn’s philosophy. I think it’s best to acknowledge that how minds change is subject to great variety. That they must change is the main point. It’s necessary for the success of the threefold struggle.

#### WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO AREN’T CONVINCED?

How easy or hard it is to change people’s minds is largely beside the point, Quinn contends. The relevant metric for us is instead whether or not people are open to and ready for a new story. “If people aren’t ready for it, then no power on earth can make a new idea catch on” (IS, 44; see also B, 50f.). Obviously, not everyone is ready at the same time. Many Takers, perhaps most, never are. Even Takers who find new ideas appealing may not be willing to figure out what to do with them (“Uru in the Valley of the Sleepers”). Maybe they find it hard to get past thinking about what they must give up, particularly when it comes to enacting a new story. Or maybe the prospect of enacting a new story is so overwhelming—and the forces dead set against it so daunting—that they don’t know where to begin.

Quinn provides a compelling reply to those in the first situation. He doesn’t take the complaint of people in the second situation as seriously as he should. But let’s assume that the vast majority of the people in situations such as these never end up changing their minds. Let’s assume that they turn out to be unreachable. Saving the world doesn’t depend on changing everyone’s mind. As it goes with memes, in terms of triggering cultural transformation, so it goes with minds. Namely, it may not require changing many minds at all to initiate significant changes (“EcoGeek” and Q&A, 392). Try all kinds of strategies to kill the lethal memes that are the focus of others’ attention. But don’t admit defeat if others—even *many* others—fail to agree with you.

## Martian Anthropology

The process of enculturation fits us with a set of eyeglasses that are all but undetectable, Derrick Jensen proclaims. “People believe they are perceiving the world as it is, without the distorting lens of culture.” But my eyeglasses largely determine “what will be in focus, what will be a blur, what gives me a headache, and what I cannot see.”<sup>8</sup> It’s the same for us all. But, with effort, our worldview is defeasible. It’s possible to remove our cultural eyeglasses “or at least to grind the lenses to make our focus broader, clearer” (2000, 40). We shouldn’t be taken aback, Jensen adds, when new insights are met with anger and derision. From his perspective, this is because manipulators of enculturative eyeglasses have done the equivalent of cursing God. Similarly, for Quinn’s character B, they’ve committed *blasphemy* (B, 32) by beginning to develop a new story to *be* in.

We’ve talked a bit about the relationship between thought and action. What, then, about the relationship between thought and perception? How about this: to change how we think, we must hone our ability to change how we see. We must perceive ourselves and the world anew. I don’t mean to suggest that we must learn to see the *really* real behind what’s deemed real according to our culture. When we remove our enculturative eyeglasses, we invariably replace them with another pair. We trade one vision for another.

Indeed, there’s no Archimedean point, no view from nowhere, no perspective from which we can observe the world as if from the outside. Cultural criticism doesn’t work this way. But via internal critique we can improve our ability to detect lethal memes, train ourselves to see more clearly what works and what doesn’t, and get better at cutting through cultural bullshit. We can *get real*, in the idiomatic sense. It’s with these endeavors that Martian anthropology comes in particularly handy.

### BOMBED BACK TO THE STONE AGE

Quinn spent years, decades, painstakingly altering his enculturative eyeglasses. The first such adjustment began when a familiar meme suddenly struck him as nonsensical. The meme is this: *victims of nuclear holocaust would be “bombed back to the Stone Age.”* No one who says this means it literally. Obviously, it’s nonsense to suggest that the detonation of a nuclear arsenal would somehow transport people back in time. But this isn’t what bothered Quinn. What struck him was what this meme says

about a common view—a “general, cultural impression” (WS, 9)—maintained by Takers about our distant ancestors.

The common view is this. Because they didn’t have access to any of the amenities that make our lives comfortable and secure, our Stone Age predecessors lived in perpetual misery and on a knife’s edge of survival (I, 220). Notice how nicely this dovetails with the idea that Takers are what humanity was meant to be. Notice also that it’s rubbish, Quinn asserts:

Stone Age peoples had all the tools they needed to support themselves in a comfortable lifestyle—not a lifestyle that you or I might find comfortable but one that *they* found comfortable. They had not only the tools—hundreds of them—but the knowledge of how to *make* the tools. Whereas you and I, along with 99.99 percent of our population, have none of this knowledge. I myself couldn’t even make a piece of string from scratch. (WS, 8; see also Zerzan 1994, 16, Zerzan 2002, 69, and Brown et al. 2012)

If our ancestors didn’t have these skills, we wouldn’t be here. We’re products of their success just as they were products of the success of those who came before them. On due reflection, this is eminently clear. But why is reflection required? What does the meme we Takers perpetuate about Stone Age peoples say about us?<sup>9</sup>

### THE “QUINN METHOD”

Discerning the nonsense embodied by this meme “awakened the Martian anthropologist in me,” states Quinn. “It was just a loose thread, but pulling on it began to unravel the fabric of our culture’s received wisdom” (WS, 10). This didn’t require discovering a new set of facts about our culture but a new way of looking at the facts at hand, a new way to perceive them (“IndieBound”).

Such an awakening might suggest that Quinn wishes to assume an outsider’s role. How much more outside can one get than going extraterrestrial? But this isn’t exactly what Quinn has in mind. In a conversation with Quinn, his interlocutor Elaine describes the means by which we can gain this new perspective as “Backing off. Trying to get a higher, wider view of the terrain” (WS, 147; see also Meadows 2008, 164). This is the essence of what assuming the position of the Martian anthropologist

involves. Operationalizing it—using what Quinn off-handedly and cheekily calls the “Quinn method” (WS, 115)—is a five-step process that requires the sort of interplay between insiders and quasi-outsiders I commented on in the prologue.

*Step 1: Hone “alertness to nonsense”* (WS, 115; my emphasis). This involves looking for two things. First, keep an eye out for what Robert Talisse calls *halo terms* and *smear terms*. Halo terms connote a positive moral judgment. Smear terms do the opposite. Both are intended to be “handy instruments for evading controversy and building consensus,” Talisse states (2012, 3). They function as rhetorical devices that signal what we should see as worthy of endorsement or condemnation without calling on us to give any thought to why we should do so. *Cult* and *gang* are quintessential smear terms; joining the latter involves being *brain-washed*, while joining the former makes one a *thug* (MI, 221 and 224). *Civilization* is a halo term; no one wants to be identified as *primitive* (except, I suppose, anarcho-primitivists), right? Both *thug* and *primitive* are also racialized terms. The former refers, at least in the United States, to black and brown men who refuse to live by the standards of those who valorize whiteness. They’re outlaws within Taker culture. The latter are Indigenous peoples who refuse to bow to Taker culture. They’re outlaws from without.

On their own, halo and smear terms aren’t forms of nonsense. They do help us to chart the patterns of our enculturation, though, which can make it easier to see absurdities that we otherwise take for granted. This task is supported by a second practice within step 1: namely, considering common tropes that are meant “to reassure us that everything we’re doing is okay” (WS, 67).

Oddly, the proposition that humans are inherently flawed is one such trope. Renée Lertzman (2008) suggests, for example, that most people aren’t apathetic about global climate change. Rather, we care *too much* about the wellbeing of the earth *and* our way of life. This creates a conflict that’s too painful for us to bear, which leads us to shut down psychically. We can’t endure the truth that what we love is the cause of unimaginable devastation to what we also love. Daniel Gilbert (2010) proposes in turn that our inaction is due in part to how the human brain functions. We easily perceive rapid climatological and ecological shifts, but we have great difficulty grasping the full magnitude of gradual changes. We don’t easily register phenomena such as the greenhouse effect or biodiversity loss, for example, in part because we’re influenced by shifting baseline syndrome.

This helps to explain why we’re reticent to make major life changes to respond to climate change and widespread ecological devastation.

I’m not qualified to say that either Lertzman or Gilbert is wrong. But the implicit message contained in each of these propositions is that we humans are powerless, or all but powerless, to change course. This incapacity is baked in to our very being. It renders questionable whether we have any sort of responsibility to enact a new story or even engage in more modest reforms. This, I dare say, is nonsense.

*Step 2: Develop a clearer sense of the assumptions that support identified nonsense.* Quinn once found himself listening to a radio talk show on which the subject of the day was the protection of endangered species. The host was unconvinced that anything needed to be done to prevent their extinction. “Personally,” Quinn recalls him saying, “I can do without songbirds” (WS, 112).

The assumptions the host makes go something like this. Songbirds exist to entertain us. (Nonsense.) But being entertained by them is unnecessary, which means *they’re* unnecessary. (Nonsense.) So the protection of endangered species like songbirds is a waste of time, energy, and money. (Nonsense on stilts.)

*Step 3: Connect these assumptions to more general ones that go to the core of the story we enact.* At the root of the radio host’s comment is the presumption that humans are separate from the rest of the community of life. We don’t have habitats, even if every other living organism does. Songbirds can lose their habitats, which is the primary factor that contributes to their endangerment. But this doesn’t affect us, because their habitats are *out there*, away from where we live. Our lives will go on largely unchanged with or without them . . . or so the Taker story goes.

*Step 4: Consider what other notions these assumptions generate or what actions they engender.* If humans are separate from the rest of the living community, we can do whatever we please to it without repercussion. Maybe we lose songbirds. But the economic returns, which are what really matter, outweigh whatever entertainment these species might provide for us (WS, 116). Indeed, we’re better off without them if they’re getting in the way of our material progress. Their loss is our gain. Once they’re gone, resource extraction from their former habitats can proceed without interference or distraction . . . or, again, so the Taker story goes.

*Step 5: Specify what makes these notions lethal.* Humans are full-fledged members of the living community. The evolutionary success of our species depended on it. And our continued existence requires that we stop

endangering ourselves by endangering fellow species. Songbirds may entertain us, yes. But they don't exist for our pleasure. No member of the living community does. Indeed, their wellbeing and ours are ineliminably linked. To go on believing otherwise will be the death of us.

The radio host's comment isn't necessarily indicative of some moral deficiency on his part, mind you. As Peter Senge points out, structure strongly influences behavior. "When placed in the same system, people, however different, tend to produce the same results" (1990, 42). This doesn't necessitate that we're inevitably powerless to change how we think and act, but adjusting our enculturative eyeglasses is rarely easy. "In fact, we usually don't see the structures [that influence us] at play much at all. Rather, *we just find ourselves feeling compelled to act in certain ways*" (ibid., 44). This is precisely what the use of Quinn's method is intended to disrupt.

"Tackling a difficult problem is often a matter of seeing where the high leverage lies, a change which—with a minimum of effort—would lead to lasting, significant improvement," Senge continues. "The only problem is that high-leverage changes are usually highly *nonobvious* to most participants in the system" (ibid., 64). Making them more obvious thus involves transitioning "from seeing parts to seeing wholes, from seeing people as helpless reactors to seeing them as active participants in shaping their reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future" (ibid., 69).

### Maieutics

Etymologically, *mosaic* comes from the Greek term *mouseion*, of the muses. It's indicative of an inspirational experience. In medieval Latin, the term morphed into *musaicus* or *mosaicus*, which connotes having a different state of mind. This is fitting.

In the process of engaging in mosaic construction, Quinn relies on an array of narrative techniques: metaphor (angel dust in "The Great Awakening" in *The Story of B*, the dancers of Terpsichore in *My Ishmael*), parable (the jellyfish story and the ABCs of ecology in *Ishmael*, "The Story of Uru"), aphorism (*Beyond Civilization*, "The B Attitudes"), re-description (the Genesis story in *Ishmael*), dream sequence (the beetle in *Providence*, Tim in Rome in *The Holy*), proceeding backward in time (*The Man Who Grew Young*), genealogy ("The Boiling Frog" in *The Story of B*), and straight-up exegesis (once Shirin becomes B). But the technique that Quinn finds most worthy of attention is maieutics. He singles it out for



discussion in the books in which it’s used, which isn’t the case with any other of his techniques. For it permits him perhaps most easily to reveal that which is familiar and commonplace to Takers to be lethal by placing cultural insiders in sustained dialogue with quasi-outsiders.

#### GIVING BIRTH TO IDEAS

Maieutics is a pedagogical technique that’s intended to help pupils become aware of ideas and insights that they may not realize they accept or are even familiar with. The most well-known practitioner of maieutics is Socrates as he’s depicted in Plato’s dialogues. Socrates asks probing questions that encourage his interlocutors to give birth, as it were, to ah-hah moments (the term derives from the Greek *maieuesthai*, to act as a midwife; B, 70, and MI, 16). In contrast to passive forms of instruction like lecturing, in which the teacher’s goal is—according to received wisdom—to fill students’ previously empty minds with newfound knowledge, maieutics supports students playing an active role in making explicit that about which they’re only nascently aware. It can’t be a one-way dictation from teacher to student. It must be interactive, for it’s the give and take between teacher and student that facilitates the birthing process.

But the tone Quinn’s maieutic teachers use differs markedly from Socrates’s tone. Socrates often treats his pupils as adversaries, even if his language is amicable. This is because he sets out to show them that they don’t know what they think they do. His immediate goal is to expose the weakness of their claims and the fragility of the grounds for their beliefs. In his hands, maieutics is thus a prototypical ground-clearing exercise. He’s often at least as interested in showing pupils that they don’t know what they think they know as he is in assisting them with birthing new ideas.

Yes, Ishmael and Charles do get frustrated with their pupils. But their message is consistently nonantagonistic, states C. A. Hilgartner. “‘You know this material,’” they implore. “‘Mother Culture has been whispering it into your ear during practically every waking moment of your life. You know it—*dig*.’ Again and again, the pupil denies knowing it, then digs, and comes up with the treasure” (1998, 172).

Even so, Quinn’s message isn’t that maieutics is the best teaching method that he’s identified. Ishmael himself admits when telling Julie about a previous student of his (Charles) who became an “itinerant lecturer or preacher,” that “Each must do what is within his or her compass. . . . I know only how to bring people along in *this* context—through dialogue.

I simply can't imagine doing it in a lecture hall. My deficiency, not his" (MI, 44; see also P, 103). It's striking, for example, how differently Charles (as B) and Shirin (as B) engage with Jared in *The Story of B*. Charles shines light on the core of Taker culture by leading Jared back in time to its founding. Shirin proceeds forward in time, taking Jared across the threshold of what makes us human in order to highlight the contours of a story that's worked for people and the planet for as long as humans have inhabited Earth (B, 128).

But the difference between Shirin's and Charles's respective teaching styles is more pronounced than this. It highlights why maieutics isn't, and needn't be, for everyone. As do some of my own students, Shirin finds maieutics "too cerebral and too circuitous" (B, 122). As she states:

Charles didn't want to carry you across the gap, Jared. He wanted you to leap across it yourself, that's why he proceeded as he did. . . . Every sentence he spoke was designed to extend the road for you by a centimeter. He was closing the gap pebble by pebble, hoping you'd eventually make the leap by yourself. . . . I don't have the patience to follow that procedure, Jared—the patience or the time. I'm going to throw you across the gap. I'm going to start with the conclusion. (Ibid., 122–23)

No two approaches to constructing, or reconstructing, a mosaic are alike, Ishmael acknowledges, "because no two pupils are ever alike" (MI, 44). This is also true of teachers. Pay close attention to what you and those with whom you engage need. "And don't flinch from looking with wide-open eyes at the things people *show you* they want" (ibid., 225). If killing lethal memes, changing minds, and enacting a new story that works for people and the planet require taking a circuitous route, so be it. If a straightforward path reveals itself, get moving. There's no one right way to proceed.

#### DESCRIPTION VERSUS PRESCRIPTION

It's not always easy to distinguish between when Quinn is offering descriptions and when he's offering prescriptions. Quinn himself acknowledges experiencing the "anthropologist's dilemma": "If I *describe* something, simply doing my job as an anthropologist, it's often assumed that I must also be *prescribing* something" (WS, 30). Indeed, descriptions are largely what he provides, intentionally leaving it up to readers to figure out how his descriptions can inform the development of a new vision.

On the other hand, when he refers to Jean Liedloff’s reports of child-rearing among tribal peoples in *The Continuum Concept*, Quinn remarks that “you can’t automatically dismiss the utility of turning a description into a prescription” (WS, 40). A good deal of what Liedloff depicts is worth putting into practice by us, he contends. The same at least provisionally may be said of Quinn’s ideas, which leaves me wondering whether this actually is what he intends.

“All descriptions carry with them weighty presumptions of value,” Jensen proclaims (2006a, 10). So perhaps we do well neither to take Quinn’s descriptions at face value nor to assume out of hand that they’re really prescriptions. Instead, consider the presumptions of value that are operative in his descriptions. What does he want to convey to us, what can we learn, how does this fit into the larger mosaic he’s constructing, and how can we build on it?

### You Are Needed

Among the interesting narrative twists in *Ishmael* is the increasing irritation that Ishmael displays in his interactions with Alan. Some students of mine find Ishmael condescending and unlikable. Others find Alan unbearably dimwitted. Whatever the case may be, Alan tells us that he’s finally found in Ishmael what he’s long desired: someone who can be a teacher for life (I, 122). Alan feels depressed and rejected when Ishmael sends him away to spend some time trying to work out on his own what laws are operative in the community of life. Nor can he bear the thought that each insight rendered through his maieutic lessons brings him one step closer to the end of his relationship with Ishmael. Even upon having a fairly complete sense of why being a Taker doesn’t work and can’t be made to work for people or the planet, Alan still displays a thoroughgoing Taker mentality when he tries to purchase Ishmael from the menagerie owner. The message is clear: Alan’s intent is to possess and control the gorilla.

More significantly, Alan’s desire to be a lifelong student signals that he’s unwilling to be a teacher himself, to engage in struggle. This betrays that he may not have the earnest desire to save the world that Ishmael’s newspaper ad requests. (At least this seems so until, in a final plot twist, he gets up the nerve to write the manuscript that becomes *Ishmael*.) Part of what holds Alan back is his refusal to accept that Ishmael isn’t holding out on him. Ishmael never intended to lay out every contour of a new story to enact and how to enact it. Ishmael couldn’t do so even

if he wanted to. Alan wants a quick fix and assumes that, in due time, Ishmael will provide it.

But this is an old mind at work, which is why Ishmael implores Alan to do what the people of our culture take ourselves to do exceptionally well: “invent” (I, 250). It’s why Ishmael emphasizes to Julie that each of his students encodes and transmits his message differently, which improves the prospects of its dissemination (MI, 68). And it’s why Quinn is insistent that each of us has the capacity to be a lethal meme killer because each of us can affect—if subtly and imperceptibly—the shape of our culture (“Who *Is* the Awakener?”).

So why not simply try this, he requests: “Be outrageous with me. . . . Be ridiculous. . . . Be totally absurd. . . . Be preposterous. . . . Stretch yourself” (BD, 35–37). Let the contagion spread. No one of us can save the world on our own. But who ever said we had to? And don’t assume that we’ll know immediately and with perfect clarity what the spreading contagion looks like.

Finally, it’s important that we attend to our needs. But it’s equally important to seek out where we’re needed. Yes, each of us is needed. Where and how isn’t for Quinn to say. He has his beetle encounter—his breakthrough epiphany (P, 16ff.). Jared has his (B, 142ff.). So does Tim (H, 375). Pay attention, Quinn implies. Keep your eyes peeled. Your beetle encounter will come, if it hasn’t already.