

JACOB HOLDT ON SAYING YES

Memoirs 1947-1977

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Lovest Thou Man ?

Man came towards me
– heavily - painfully –
behind him the path
with slimy tracks
of lies and festering sores -.
A voice boomed: Lovest thou Man?
No! I said – I can't.
Love! Said the voice.
Man came –
nearer – crawling –
drooling of lust –
with flies and vermin
in the sores of his belly.
Hammered the voice :
- Lovest thou Man ?
No ! I said.
Love! said the voice.

Nearer – and slowly nearer –
inch by inch –
the stench was heavy
from Lie's thousands of diseases –
and the voice threatened:

– Lovest thou Man ?
– No – I don't love !
– Love! Said the voice.

Then he rose to his feet –
and he stretched his hands towards me,
and lo: the spike wounds oozed red –
the naked arms were covered to the shoulders
with black sores of sin –
and the man laughed :

- Thus did God love !

A blindfold fell from my eyes –
And I shouted :

- Mand – I love you !

And my mouth was full of blood –
the blood of Man.

Danish poem by Nis Petersen from *The Pipers of the Night* (1926), which I found in English during my vagabonding in the USA and carried with me everywhere as inspiration during my encounters with the people around me. Since then it has been the introduction to all my "On Saying Yes" lectures.

FOREWORD

"ON SAYING YES TO INTEGRATE WITH THE OTHERS"

On the surface, my life looked like a success when Politiken's Publishers in 2008 proposed my lecture "On saying yes" published as a book. That was the year I sadly decided to say no to the American highways after 30 years of lecturing in the US. It seemed to me that I had lived on those roads almost all my life - ever since my first unreserved "yes" as a young vagabond in the years 1970 to 1975. Until then, I had lived life hurriedly forward, always carried forward by loving people, without even understanding why they did it and what had really happened to myself in the process. Was I even capable of taking responsibility for my life?

I had reportedly had the longest "track record" and booked lecture series of any lecturer in American universities. Time and again, I had filled the largest auditoriums in Harvard and other Ivy League schools, where I was frequently told that only a handful of the pampered students showed up for lectures when the world's famous heads of state came to visit. I had slept in beds that both Reagan and Gorbachev had slept in shortly before, and I had been driven in long limousines (with ad libitum bars) by black, uniformed chauffeurs - from whom I sat embarrassingly hidden behind tinted windows - through the old ghetto neighborhoods about which I was now lecturing. After long and exhausting journeys, I had repeatedly been recharged with new energy when greeted by a large crowd of eager students waiting in the snow and frost with giant "Welcome Jacob Holdt" banners or garlanded with flowers by them upon arrival in Hawaii even at four in the morning.

I didn't come to the apparent success asleep. At each university, I typically arrived at 5 p.m. and lugged half a ton of slide equipment plus books in and out again after midnight. After an hour of setting up the equipment with the janitors, I dined in upscale restaurants with usually 10-15 select members from faculties and student organizations and then was locked in dark auditoriums for four hours changing slide trays every five minutes until midnight. Truly "what a waste of a life". A strange process, for how could I help but feel that I could almost walk on water, watching happy people pour in night after night, and after pressing a few buttons, five hours later seeing them come out crying and turning their eyes away in guilt? In my younger years I tried to achieve a more human relationship with them by going out afterwards and drinking beer with the now speechless students. But - liberatingly for myself too - I soon changed it to the next morning from 8am to 12pm to get them into dialogue and racism workshops. It was here that I myself learned most about the deep pain behind racism, when together we reached down to all that was hurting each individual, through quite different redemptive tears, and discovered that they were not alone in their pain. This moment of happiness, when both black and white came to the shared realization that they were equally victimized, unfortunately came almost every day, just before I had to leave to drive or fly all afternoon to the next university, where the whole process repeated itself. Day after day after day. 20 times at Berkeley, 18 at Harvard, 17 at Cornell, etc., etc. Frequently, students would come and tell me that they had hitchhiked or driven up to 2,200 miles to experience my lecture - for the second time - now with friends they had dragged along.

In many places, they subsequently formed "American Pictures Unlearning Racism" groups where they met weekly to continue working on the racism that I had pointed out they would carry forward if they didn't learn to acknowledge it and take responsibility for it. Of course, I never blamed them for it, as they had been given no choice in their upbringing - and white guilt for sinning is considered the worst racism by blacks. Often, I was invited along when they 10, 15 and 20 years later met again to evaluate the meaning American Pictures had had for them later in life.

Just as, many years later, I frequently met my former students in high positions in government and finance, where they told me - or described in long letters - that the American Pictures experience had changed their lives and made them more socially conscious and responsible as powerholders.

In Denmark, I also experienced a short-lived success, but there it was clearly conditioned by the strong anti-American feelings just after the Vietnam War. That is, we had an urge to find scapegoats and not as a self-examination of the rising racism I began to feel here at home in the 80s. Not once in all those years did I hear Europeans say that American Pictures had changed their lives. But now that the years had flown by, we finally had a black president in 2008 and things seemed to be moving forward in America. So I felt it was time for myself to look back a little at the developments from that time, when neither the students nor I understood why I, as a young immigrant, had ended up living among the poorest blacks in squalid shacks in the South, to the point where Obama (one of the students from the group of black Harvard Law students - HBLSA - who had organized most of my lectures) had now reached so high.

Although over the years I had grown accustomed to taking it all for granted, I began to marvel that I had survived for so many years in the fraught American "us and them" tension between blacks and whites - without ever having been subjected to any other criticism, other than that "the lecturer smelled" (because there was often no time for showers on the highway with my car full of homeless vagrants) - especially in comparison to how difficult it was to keep one's nose clean in the increasingly uncompromising and polarized debate at home in Denmark. How had I managed to end up in the role of messenger between black and white without ever being revealed as the "emperor with no clothes on" I always deep down perceived myself to be?

In trying to understand my divided life, I had frequently benefited from being a privileged object of American psychologists, critics, writers, astrologers, pocket philosophers, and whatnot who had stood on their heads to scrutinize and dissect me in an attempt to understand why I could do what they themselves could not, namely, pretend to integrate socially with their fellow blacks. In their despondency, they always sought an

explanatory model in something from "out of space" and pointed out the similarity between myself and two other immigrant Danish slum photographer activists, Jacob A. Riis (1849-1914) and Peter Sekaer (1901-1950) - and of course a social activist like Louis Pio, who emigrated after founding the Social Democracy and thus in a sense the Danish welfare state.

With the navel-gazing one inevitably entangles oneself in by being so often analyzed by others, I often tried to examine for myself what common denominators there were between us in terms of psychological damage. Yes, even comparative horoscopes were made of me and Jacob Riis - who came to the US from my own West Jutland neighborhood, exactly 50 years before Peter Sekaer, who in turn came 50 years before me. With colored glass plates he made the world's first slide show (while I think I made the last one before the age of digitalization) and with the same zeal, monomaniacal fanaticism, and oratory technique he travelled many of the same stretches as I to preach to the better off about their responsibility for "the other half". Did we, for example, have strongly authoritarian fathers and sensitive mothers? Did we suffer the same failures in school that had made us such warped existences that we committed our lives to even more warped existences?

When, like me, I felt I had no special innate abilities, I always found some comfort in Americans' explanations of our common Danish roots. After all, the skewed view of the world that made us so famous for our photographic frog's-eye view of the United States (as opposed to immigrants from other countries) was about the fact that people and groups who have been harmed or marginalized in various ways by the majority have a right not only to be seen (photographed), but also to be helped through the continuous change and harmonization of society - that is, through the social responsibility and compassion of fellow citizens. An idea in sharp contrast to the American philosophy that everyone is his own man.

But on this point, too, I found myself confused and alienated upon returning home in 2008, because Denmark had in the meantime become heavily "Americanized" in its social thinking, and previous concepts like "solidarity," "it's society's fault," and "humanism" had become dirty words. I was often accused of not having kept up with developments - which I had in fact in later years in the US, where audiences were increasingly asking questions: "Why are you denouncing American racism when Danish racism is by any measure much worse?"

So the desire to now write something about how we can avoid marginalizing our fellow citizens that could be used in both worlds began to arise. And since I had learned over many years that people only listen and change when you tell authentically and contagiously from personal experience, it had to be that method again, which is also the only one I - without any real education - have the prerequisites for.

One of the most important leaps for me in critical self-knowledge was when my old girlfriend in San Francisco, Marly Sockol, as a psychiatrist in 1998, diagnosed me with ADHD (or rather ADD) and jokingly added: "That's why I broke up with you in 1972, because I saw no future with you!" As fate would have it, the sense of loss her rejection gave me at the time was what led me to enter into and identify with the pain of the ghettos. She pointed out that I probably could not have made American Pictures without this ADHD with its typical symptoms such as not being able to choose (which led to my "On saying yes" pocket philosophy) and not being able to think through courses of action, which led to "excessive risk taking" - in the same way as so many criminals with ADHD - and conversely also developed no fear of people, such as criminals for example. I was both angry and relieved at the same time.

"Are you saying that I ended up making American Pictures because of my ADHD?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied with her teasing, Jewish humor.

With the huge defeat my ADHD brought me early in school came a huge loss of self-esteem, which resulted in a deeper anger, edginess, and constant attempts to get attention.

Throughout life, the inability to keep up in conversations and many forms of social interaction has caused me to lash out in "platitudes", "boorishness", "callousness", "opinionatedness", etc., that often surprise people who, based on my work, think too highly of me.

For either I cannot focus on a subject and show interest in it - or I throw myself at it with such fanaticism that I turn in thousands of pages or pictures on subjects that others are able to describe in a few lines. Here in *On Saying Yes*, the reader will be irritated first and foremost by my ADHD in the form of my rambunctious - sometimes endless - sentences that knot in all sorts of intuitive directions in the style of my original vagabonding.

That I dare to publish "memoirs" anyway is because, in order to remember and understand for myself what I was walking around doing, I have spent most of my life writing diaries and endless letters and documenting almost everything I experienced by taking tens of thousands of chronologically arranged photographs. Even then, the photos from my time in the USA were arranged in folders like "criminals", "homosexuals", "Ku Klux Klan", etc., with exact locations and times, so that others could use them if - as I frequently feared - I did not survive the experiences along the way. Therefore, I have little to build on when I write, as well as evidence for most of the stories that some - frequently also myself with my poor memory - in today's quite different frame of understanding might otherwise easily doubt.

Originally, I had envisioned that my descriptions of each group might end up being a kind of personally experienced sociology book in the style of *American Pictures*, which has been used in courses such as sociology, ethics, Black Studies, and American Studies at numerous universities. But as the book progressed, I realized that my knowledge of groups other than blacks was too superficial to contribute more than what most readers already know. Instead, I will limit myself to simply recounting my own experiences on the assumption that my readers already know what, for example, Jewish, gay, or Muslim culture is all about. As for our integration with the groups of people we are brought up to harbor prejudices against, it is my conviction and my declared aim to show that we can all integrate with them and be enriched by it.

In later volumes of my memoirs, I hope to elaborate on the descriptions of how I learned to take responsibility for particularly vulnerable or excluded groups like women, black women, and gays - and integrate with Jews, Muslims, prostitutes, terrorists, criminals, homeless people, Nazis, refugees, the Ku Klux Klan, KGB, Stasi, Indians, artists, hitchhikers, the disabled, Hizb-ut-Tahrir, millionaires, royalty, American students, the media, drug addicts, mass murderers, groupies, Europeans, transgenders, racists, Christians, incest victims and pedophiles, fellow travelers, intellectuals, Danes and their Danish-ness, and not least our own family members.

But in this first introductory book I will try to analyze the factors of my childhood and youth that led me to the USA - despite the gigantic prejudices I had towards America at that time - and that led me to come out of my isolation and to open up to other groups and to love the USA.

It became a lifelong journey in which I ended up - like the persecuted Jew Hannah Arendt - doing away with oppressive societal ideologies such as both individualism and collectivism in order to embrace a pluralism that does not want to develop any form of society, but rather to unconditionally accept and love societal groups as they are here and now, without wanting to try to assimilate, change or ultimately destroy them. The only group I have ever tried to change and take responsibility for is all of us who constitute an oppressive majority - usually without even realizing it or being able to "see the beam in the eye".

An important concept that recurs frequently in the book is the mention of my many "saving angels" who throughout my life held my hand and helped me get ahead despite all my foolishness, congenital disabilities, learning difficulties, stuffy self-absorption and "annoying sides", whereby my life through their loving intervention nevertheless succeeded to a degree where many others in the same situation would have gone down the drain. My gratitude to my saving angels is worth a whole book in itself, but my description of them is of course also intended to inspire others with a little psychic surplus to act as saving angels themselves to "our neighbor's neglected and annoying child" - before it's too late.

My writing started in the midst of the biggest crisis Europe and the US have experienced in my lifetime, when millions suddenly felt socially and economically marginalized. And since the financial crisis, the race to personally survive (at the expense of others) in a globalized world has only got worse. A key idea of the book is therefore to give challenged young people in particular - who feel without the same security my generation grew up with - some inspiration to plunge into other forms of existence than a climate-destroying flight to meet exotic people in distant lands. Instead, I would like to inspire people to travel into, and find safety in, the company of more or less exotic minorities in the immediate vicinity - and find mutually integrating joy and happiness therein.

American Pictures' preface ended with me inviting travelers from around the world to move in and integrate with each other in my home and lecture rooms on the mall in Copenhagen, where thousands over ten years watched the show. In that sense, life goes a bit in circles for me, for the reader is still welcome, as I have now set up the premises as a dialogue and meeting space where Jews, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs, Hindus, refugees, women at risk of violence and LGBT people and other persecuted groups can safely meet and work together in what we now call the Ubuntu House - after Nelson Mandela's old African pluralist concept that "I am something only by virtue of you being something." So come and integrate with each other or revisit American Pictures or my new talk - which like this book is titled, "On Saying Yes".

**With love, Jacob Holdt,
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