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**IS THE
AMERICAN
DREAM
KILLING
YOU?**

How “the Market” Rules Our Lives



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The gods we worship write their names on our faces; be sure of that. And a man will worship something—have not doubts about that, either. He may think that his tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of his heart—but it will out. That which dominates will determine his life and character. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| PROLOGUE: The Sound of the Alarm | 1 |
| INTRODUCTION: The Economic Beast Rethinking the Market | 13 |
| ONE: Burnout The Market vs. Human Health | 29 |
| TWO: Meltdown The Market vs. the Nuclear Family | 55 |
| THREE: The Bubble The Market vs. Reality | 81 |
| FOUR: Flatland The Market vs. the Good | 105 |
| FIVE: Jolts Per Minute The Market vs. Culture | 123 |
| SIX: Borrowed Time The Market vs. the Environment | 141 |
| SEVEN: The Ozone Hole The Market vs. Business | 173 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| EIGHT: The Modern God | 207 |
| The Market vs. God | |
| NINE: The Market Curve | 239 |
| The Market vs. America | |
| EPILOGUE: The Market Cross | 251 |
| APPENDIX A: The American Hypermarket, 1950–2000 | 263 |
| APPENDIX B: Society in the Balance | 265 |
| APPENDIX C: A Market Lexicon | 267 |
| APPENDIX D: Market Metaphysics | 271 |
| Notes | 273 |
| List of Illustrations | 283 |
| Acknowledgments | 287 |
| Index | 000 |

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PROLOGUE: The Sound of the Alarm



The alarm is ringing.

You jerk awake, tense, aware only of the blare, then fall back in recognition. There is a brief moment of peace, as if your consciousness were confused about what to do next, and then it hits you, arising from your subconscious, where it has lain all evening: The List. All those things you did not complete yesterday, and all those other things you have to get done today. The List is its own infomercial, in full sound and video, complete with snippets of conversation and shots of the office. And stuck on auto replay. Okay, you think: just put your feet on the floor.

That's it: the race is on. In the next hour the entire house fires its engines and rolls to the starting line. Kids up, dog out, showers all around, paper fetched, breakfast on the table . . . You pass your wife in the hallway several times, both of you half-dressed, seeking to check off the next item. Mayhem.

Inevitably you forget something, and today it's the trash. The trash! It dawns on you in the shower. You bolt out, throw on a robe, run out back with your loafers on, and drag the two overflowing cans up to the street just in time to catch the truck. Phew!

Walking back down the driveway, you briefly marvel at those cans. By the end of the week the two of them are always full, and you can't for the life of you figure out why. How does your family consume so much? Yet you do, and millions like you do too. The average American discards nearly a ton of trash every year, which is twice as much as a Western European, and nearly three times as much as a Japanese. Scientists even estimate that if Earth's 6 billion inhabitants consumed as much as the average American, we would need at least four additional planets to keep up.

Back in the house the kids are watching television, and you tell them to shut it off, just as you have to keep them off the Internet. There are only so many murders and copulations to be had before breakfast. Today you even hold back the sports page, since there's nothing but steroids and rape. So you sit there reading it yourself, the List playing in the background, until you look up, startled by what you find. Your young one is reading *The Cheerios Play Book*, in which he's placing the little Os in cardboard holes, and your oldest is eating a bowlful of . . . Cheerios. There it is, you think: another cradle-to-grave victory for the General Mills marketing department. You can't win.

The List breaks in, you glance at your watch, and tell your oldest to finish up. You have so much to do today. Your wife does too, and the young one is swept off to day care with hardly a word—did she say good-bye? You drop the bowls in the sink for later—there's no time now—herd your budding teenage daughter to the car, and pull out of the driveway with a brief screech.

Straight ahead, an enormous object expands to fill the windshield: Xanadu. Your new neighbor's megahouse weighs in at ten thousand square feet, easy. It's got a couple of turrets, multiple decks, a three-car garage, an indoor pool (so you've heard), an outdoor pool, and a gazebo with more frill than a wedding dress. From up there, the rest of the neighborhood must look

like a tiny hamlet at the foot of the lord's castle. The new American Dream. And they don't even have any kids! A marketing exec, you've heard. After six months, you haven't even said hello.

You look in the rearview mirror: your seventies ranch is looking smaller every year. And in relative terms, it is: since 1975, the average American home has grown steadily in size, while the number of people per house has steadily declined. Go figure. Pretty soon every man really *will* have his own castle.

You step on it now, acutely aware that you are driving away from your office, and finally reach your daughter's school. The flag is snapping in the breeze out front. You are happy she is in private school—she is getting a great education—but you wish she could go to the local junior high. Then your wife wouldn't have to work. After all, you pay your taxes, don't you? But when you went to the open house you couldn't believe it. It was like entering the set of *Road Warrior*. The body art, the nose rings, the tattered clothes, boys with their pants below their hips, the underwear hanging out in emulation of their ex-con heroes—the first thing they do in prison is remove your belt. That girl with HO! on her T-shirt, a diamond in her navel. Hoods over headphones, rap leaking through. Black T-shirts with MEGADEATH on them. All flowing past you in the hallways like sea wreckage, all that is left after the ship goes down.

No way, you couldn't do *that* to her, no matter what it took.

Your daughter leaps out with a quick good-bye, and the car is silent. With the List playing in your mind, you've hardly spoken to her.

Now at least you are headed toward the office. You count the traffic lights until you see the one with the camera, and give it the gas. You hear it's a private company that runs the damn thing, and they get a percentage of every ticket. No wonder the light is so quick. Then it's time for your morning pit stop. The Golden Arches appear, and you head to the drive-thru for your coffee. As you wait at the window, you look inside, where the obesity epidemic is in full view. Thirty percent of American adults are now obese, and McDonald's seems to be their home away from home, on both sides of the counter. The problem is spreading among children, too, but you only see one of those, a kid getting his supersized soda on the way to school. The statue of Ronald looks on.

The entrance ramp is just around the corner, and the long haul to D.C. begins. The traffic is thick this morning, but still moving. You are an expert on

every leg of this journey, and its history. Just five years ago, your commute took 45 minutes, but now there are days when it hits an hour and a half. If there is an accident on either side of the road, you've had it. On Fridays in the summer, you can count on two hours. You added this up once, stunned by the result: If you commute one hour each way every working day, and work 48 weeks a year for 30 years, you will have spent 14,400 waking hours in your car by the time you retire. Since you are awake only 16 hours a day, that is 900 waking days in your car, the equivalent of a two-and-a-half-year sentence in solitary confinement. And now that the traffic has added another half hour each way, you've just received another 1.25 years for good behavior.

The rise in commuting time is all because of the sprawl, of course, which has congested the entire area in recent years. When you first started this commute, there were green fields here. Now all you can see is mile after mile of tract homes, broken only by strip malls, all of it designed by an architect in love with military barracks. And yet this is nothing but the beginning: the entire area from Washington to Boston has been slowly congealing into a single megalopolis, a landscape as intricate as any semiconductor, while the green space everywhere has been evaporating at a record rate. Two acres of farmland disappear every minute to development, the fastest such decline in the country's history. The road to your kids' school used to be two lanes; now it is nine lanes wide at one point, if you count the turn lanes.

As the open space has shrunk, so has the patience of the commuters. It used to be people would slow down when they saw your blinker and let you in when you came off the ramp: no more. The commute is tenser than ever. But what can you do about it? You have to worry about road rage, some psycho with a gun. After all, when you have snipers gunning people down from the trunk of their car, as happened right near here, the commute has certainly changed.

As if to reinforce that thought, the prison soon appears ahead, in all its deathly calm. Slits for windows. Slinkies of razor wire. An empty courtyard by the highway's edge. You drove by it for years without giving it a second thought, as if it was a natural part of the landscape, but now it haunts you every morning. Somewhere along the line you learned that the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. In the past twenty years, it has increased nearly five hundred percent. There are now 2.1 million Americans behind bars, the equivalent of putting the entire populations of Boston, Seat-

tle, Denver, and Washington, D.C. in prison. God only knows what goes on in there, you think: One out of five is mentally ill. The brick fortress accelerates behind you, and you breathe easier again. A sip of coffee through a plastic lid.

A helicopter is circling over the highway, which reminds you to turn on the traffic report. No major backups, you are happy to learn, so maybe just an hour today. The air quality is Code Red, however, which basically means you are breathing through your tailpipe. Then the new electronic sign over the highway appears, the one that broadcasts the latest Threat Level from Homeland Security. You're lucky: It's only yellow today, a "significant risk of terrorist attack." So it's safer to move around than it is to breathe.

As the neon sign passes overhead, it's like a border crossing. Home lies behind you, Washington lies ahead, and chaos enters your mind, a babble of media images: towers collapsing, a dark hole in the side of the Pentagon, the anthrax strike—the last two dead ahead. Afghanistan, Iraq—the news is all about Iraq. But for all the news, you can't make sense of it all. You know the country was attacked by people who hijacked airplanes and crashed them into our buildings, but you're really not sure why, no one has adequately explained it, these people killing themselves like that, all because they hate the United States? Three thousand people, dead. Silence. You know we invaded Afghanistan to take out the terrorists, which made perfect sense, but didn't we give these same people \$3 billion just a few years ago? Then we invaded Iraq, whom we also used to fund, because they were supposedly linked to the terrorists and had weapons of mass destruction that would make the air even worse than it is. But then no weapons of mass destruction were found, and the president admitted that there was no link after all, so what are you supposed to make of that? It sure would be nice to know what you are fighting for, particularly if you may die for it. Forty billion a year on intelligence, and this is the result. If your kid was on the ground there, you would be going out of your mind. Over one thousand so far, gone. No wonder trust in government has plunged. Can't you see the sign over the highway? **HOMELAND SECURITY ALERT, LEVEL RED: SEVERE THREAT OF COVER-UP.**

A bump jars your thoughts, and you realize you have entered D.C. because the road is so bad. Welcome to the legacy of Marion Barry. Imagine, the capital of the world's superpower, run by a crack user. A great place to launch a war on drugs. And now he's back on the city council. You tense up at the wheel, unconsciously. Somehow, as the density of the buildings increases, the

temperature seems to rise. And of course, now is the time when your gas light goes on. You hate stopping here, you feel so exposed, but you pull over to the next pump and do it anyway. As you are paying the cashier, a young black man, it suddenly strikes you: it's people like him who are dying in Iraq. The all-volunteer force, they call it. It sounds so fair and just. But none of the top professionals you know have ever served; nor do their kids. Why don't the rich serve the country anymore?

Back on the road, the huge white dome of the Capitol appears in the distance, as magnificent as ever, but once you look past the architecture, you're not sure what to think anymore, there's just a wrenching feeling, more potholes in the road. In the past few years you've seen your country do things you thought were impossible. Round people up and send them to Cuba with bags on their heads, where they sit indefinitely, without benefit of a lawyer, until a military tribunal decides their fate. Scores of them, trying to commit suicide it's so bad. Or worse, shipping them to other countries, where we know they will be tortured for information, thereby justifying everything they might have done to us. Invading an entire nation on false pretenses, then torturing prisoners in Saddam Hussein's own prison. Numerous unexplained deaths. Unspeakable.

As a lawyer, you cannot believe this is happening, and that people here, in Washington, D.C., bear much of the responsibility for it. The new attorney general even wrote the torture policy. You did not think such things were possible, here in America. This is not the Constitution you studied. Does anyone care anymore? But you also feel that knife twist deep inside you, hear that hollow ring to your own words. What leg do you have to stand on? The fact is, you went to law school with all kinds of ideals, and they all disappeared on the way to partner, when you discovered that the law had become a business, and nothing more. For years you lived off the misery of others: nasty divorces, personal injuries, medical malpractice. You leveraged a society that had turned on itself, where if you burned your lip on some hot coffee you could sue McDonald's for millions. Winning was everything. And when you finally got sick of it, in ways you could not express, you did what you thought was the right thing and took the corporate counsel job, where at least the hours were less, only to find yourself in an even deeper moral swamp, a place with less integrity than the Simpson trial. Oh yes, O.J.: the blood on his socks just wasn't enough.

Several potholes later, you finally turn into your parking garage. You are late, as you frequently are on drop-off days, but there is no way around it. So far no one has said anything, but it adds a tangible layer of stress that you don't need. You enter your office at a full clip, toss your coat on the chair, and look at the clock: you're okay, fifteen minutes until the staff meeting. You sit down in your chair, collect your thoughts, and unfurl the paper you haven't had time to read. The media, you think with a sinking stomach. Celebrity journalists hawking products without telling you, chasing ambulances, always trying to tear down somebody, and not even trying to be evenhanded, the whole thing looking more like entertainment every day. What happened? Something has come between you and the truth, between you and all that exists beyond your own immediate experience, what your own two eyes can tell you. You have to question everything you read.

You look at the clock: time to go. A minute later you are in the CEO's office with the rest of the management team. You are polite, of course, but as assistant corporate counsel, you know too much to respect the man who runs your corporation. You know he is out for himself, that he has formed a small cabal at the top to leverage the entire company for their own personal gain, that he has stocked the board with supporters and presented rosy projections to analysts that you strongly suspect are fraudulent. When you were younger, you would have said something about this, but now you know that what is going on is not only common, but in many ways expected these days, and that if you stick your neck out it will only get cut off. The CEO makes over five hundred times what the average person in the company makes, but this is normal in America today, where the gap between rich and poor has grown steadily for thirty years, and is now the widest in all the rich democracies, on par with the third world. In the world at large, you read in *Forbes*, there are 358 billionaires, whose net worth is greater than that of the poorest two and a half billion people, people who live on less than two dollars a day. How long can this continue?

The meeting drones on, but you can't keep focused on it. The last few years in business have been such an eye-opener. Outside the company there has been an unprecedented number of scandals, so many that you can hardly keep track of them all. Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, Tyco, Freddie Mac, Andersen, all the major Wall Street banks . . . They involved some of the largest corporations in America, companies that provided the Internet, appli-

ances, electricity, mortgages, phone service, computers, medicine, even the kids' toys. No matter where you go in your house, you run into them. Still, the scandals just revealed what you knew had been going on all along, what everyone in business knew was going on, but no one wanted to admit, because that wasn't part of the game. If your CEO knew what you were thinking, he would be the very first to call you a cynic. Though it took you years to realize it, and to admit it to yourself, the essence of business, and thus the fundamental principle of your professional life, was no different than a con. It was maintaining the appearance of a moral reality while practicing the opposite, and pocketing the difference. Your own CEO was always making statements about his responsibility to the employees and the public while secretly draining the world around him of every cent. He was rich, though, which made him an American success story. He was frequently on television, where the truth about him was never spoken. And while you hoped and prayed that his lies would catch up with him in the end, you also knew that they probably wouldn't. For every CEO who was caught, there were a hundred more still under their rocks. That is how they got to the top in the first place. And even if they were caught, the worst they would get is a slap on the wrist, a function of the weakness of the law, the impotence of government, and the lawyers they could buy, lawyers like you.

After the meeting you go back to your office. As you walk through the company, you acknowledge the people you pass by, but it is nothing but the nod between jousters. Office relationships are like business as a whole: pleasant on the surface, deadly underneath. There was loyalty and teamwork when you first got here, but somehow all that evaporated, replaced by a cycle of hirings and firings, and competition so intense that you always kept one eye forward, another on your back. The only good thing about the stress was that it made the day pass quickly. You had no time to think.

The phone rings. You look at the caller ID and cringe: a 212 area code. You pick up the phone, and your worst fears come true. It is your company's investment bank, calling about their latest scheme, something dreamed up on their computers that is supposed to save you taxes while making your balance sheet look stronger than it really is. All of it very legal, of course, your account manager is quick to point out. You don't know whether to laugh or throw up. Since 9/11, nothing has changed at all. But the CEO has a cozy relationship with them, so you have to listen.

The rest of the day passes quickly, so quickly that it seems, as you step back into your car, that you just got out of it. It's almost six as you pull onto the Beltway, and you groan at the sight of the parking lot ahead of you. Two hours tonight, easy. This kind of traffic does not suddenly clear up. You look in the glove box, but you don't feel like any more books on tape, you don't even want any music, so instead you start thinking about the weekend, even if it is a few days away. You've got a lot to do, things have been piling up. There's two soccer games, and the grass, and the car needs an oil change, and your wife finally found a babysitter, so you're actually going out on Saturday night, though you can't remember where. It doesn't matter. You just want to spend time with her and the family, forget about things. You used to be more community-focused, but all that has changed in the past few years. You don't have a lot of time, first of all, but the world has changed, too. You used to spend a lot more time at church functions, but how can you, when you can't even look at the priests anymore without wondering what they are doing with the altar boys? And you used to volunteer at the United Way, but after the third financial scandal you finally said enough. You don't even donate anymore. Now you just like to take the kids to the park, which is beautiful, but virtually empty, even on the weekends, since everyone is at the mall.

Suddenly you feel a familiar headache coming on. You pop an aspirin, remembering how you swore you weren't going to live like this anymore, when you were down in the Islands. The thought spreads an aching beautiful panorama across your mind: brilliant white crescent of beach, leaning palms, aqua water. It took you three days just to get all the motion out of your system and relax, but by the end of the week you were ready to trade places with the fishing guide. You even looked at real estate, some bungalow with a view to St. Barts. It all seemed so real, so doable, just chucking it all. What happened?

The pounding in your temples is still there when you arrive home: two hours, door-to-door, as predicted. Your wife and kids are eating dinner, as you asked them to do when you're late. Otherwise the kids stay up too late, and you have no time to yourself. Your daughter is wearing a T-shirt with the picture of a rapper flipping you off. This is art. You tell her to take it off, and ask your wife why she didn't say something. "Because I can't do everything," she says, and you know where that conversation is going, she looks frazzled, so you drop it and get a beer out of the fridge. This one beer is your evening gift. You savor it. It brackets the thirty seconds you spend in your cocoon

upon awakening, the antidote to the List. As you crack it open, you notice the cereal bowls from this morning—and yesterday—in the sink. But you don't have the energy.

You sit down and have your dinner, the second half alone. Upstairs your wife is putting the kids in bed. You wish you had had more time with them, but your commute is a lot longer than hers. When you are done, you go to their rooms, but they are already asleep. Then you crawl into bed yourself, next to your wife, who puts aside her laptop. You have a brief conversation about bills, and how the kids are doing, but you don't feel like talking about your day, and you don't particularly want to hear about her office politics, either. So after the practical matters conclude, you both lie there reading next to each other, not saying anything, for half an hour, until one of you finally clicks off the light. Shortly thereafter you feel her hand on your back, but that is the very last thing you want, you can't even imagine it right now, your body feels so completely dead. At the same time you know why, because you are very well informed. Over half of all married couples are too tired when they get home from work to have sex. Over 65 million Americans suffer from the symptoms of stress, including nearly half of all salaried workers. Clearly this must have something to do with the divorce rate, which is hovering at an all-time high, with a third of all marriages dissolving in ten years; and the rate of child abuse, which has tripled in the last twenty-five years; but as the hand sags and retreats, and you slip into sleep, you can only hope that your family doesn't become another statistic.

When you awake, it is sudden, and complete, and much earlier than usual. All is dark around you, but your mind is on fire, as if it has been concentrating for hours. It is a moment of great clarity, without the cobwebs of the List, of your entire life weighing you down, a moment when the questions of the day, and of all preceding days, leap out at you in unison, forming a single question.

Why are things this way?

The question is so enormous it seems impossible to answer. It goes beyond your country to the very times you live in, to modernity itself. It leads you into the very thickets of the system, that ethereal boundary you live in, the invisible source of the way things are, a matrix gone mad. But every once in a while, in rare moments like these, when you have a spell of quiet, and feel the presence of your own soul, you sense the answer. There is a common

thread connecting the garbage cans to the megahouse, the corporate crime to the selfish government, the income gap to the terrorism, *The Cheerios Play Book* to the war in Iraq, the aspirin to Wall Street, the television to the prison population, the stress to the sprawl. Staring into the quiet darkness, you sense that there is something *out there* responsible for this daily insanity, this perpetual chaos, this devastating meaninglessness. There is a reason why nothing makes sense, why life's purpose eludes you, why happiness is so fleeting, why you can't trust anyone anymore, and why so many people around the world would like to see you dead, just because you are an American. There is one primary cause behind this entire psychotic system, and that is—

You freeze. No, it can't be!

The alarm is ringing.