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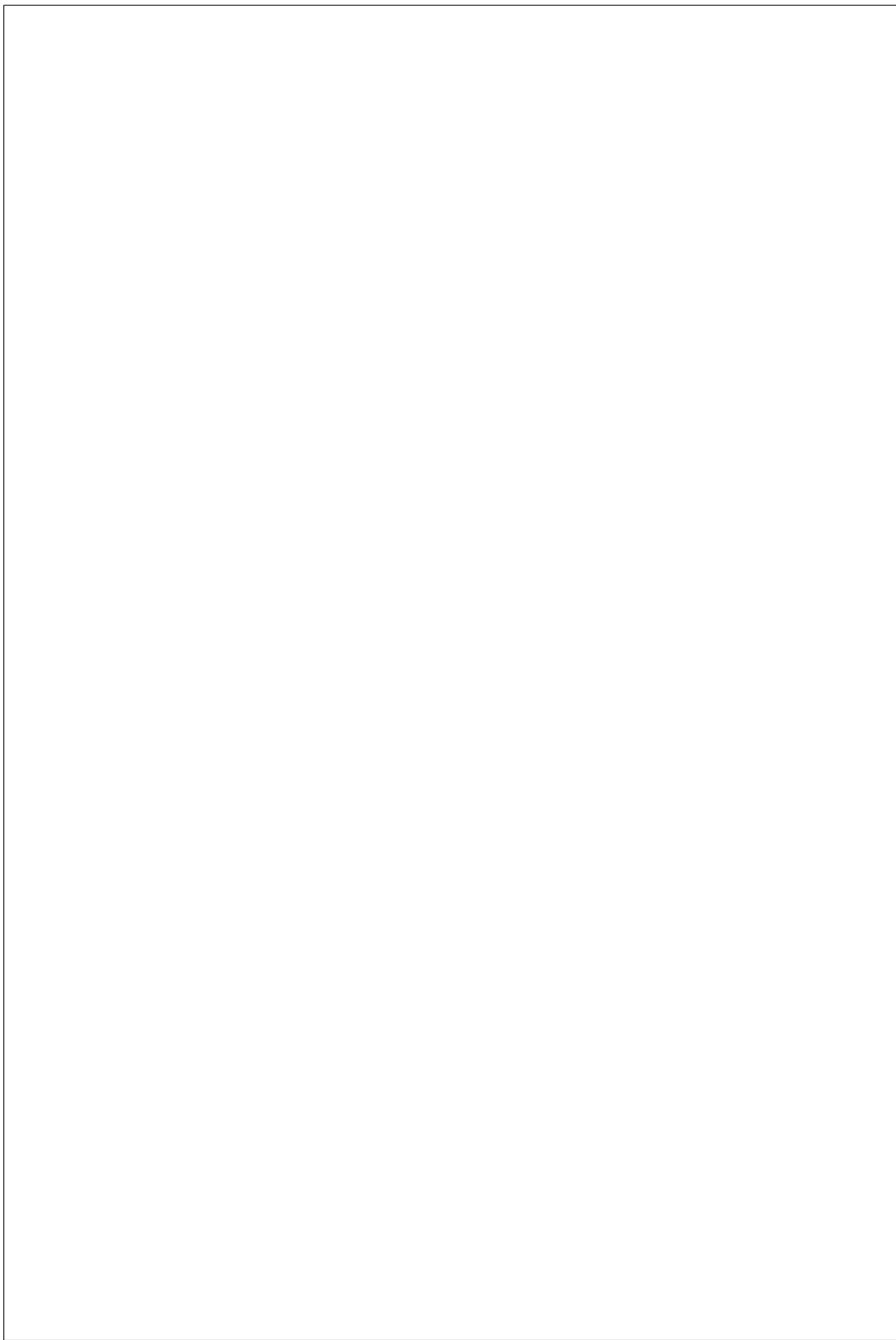
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Dark  
Age  
Ahead



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# Dark Age Ahead

JANE JACOBS



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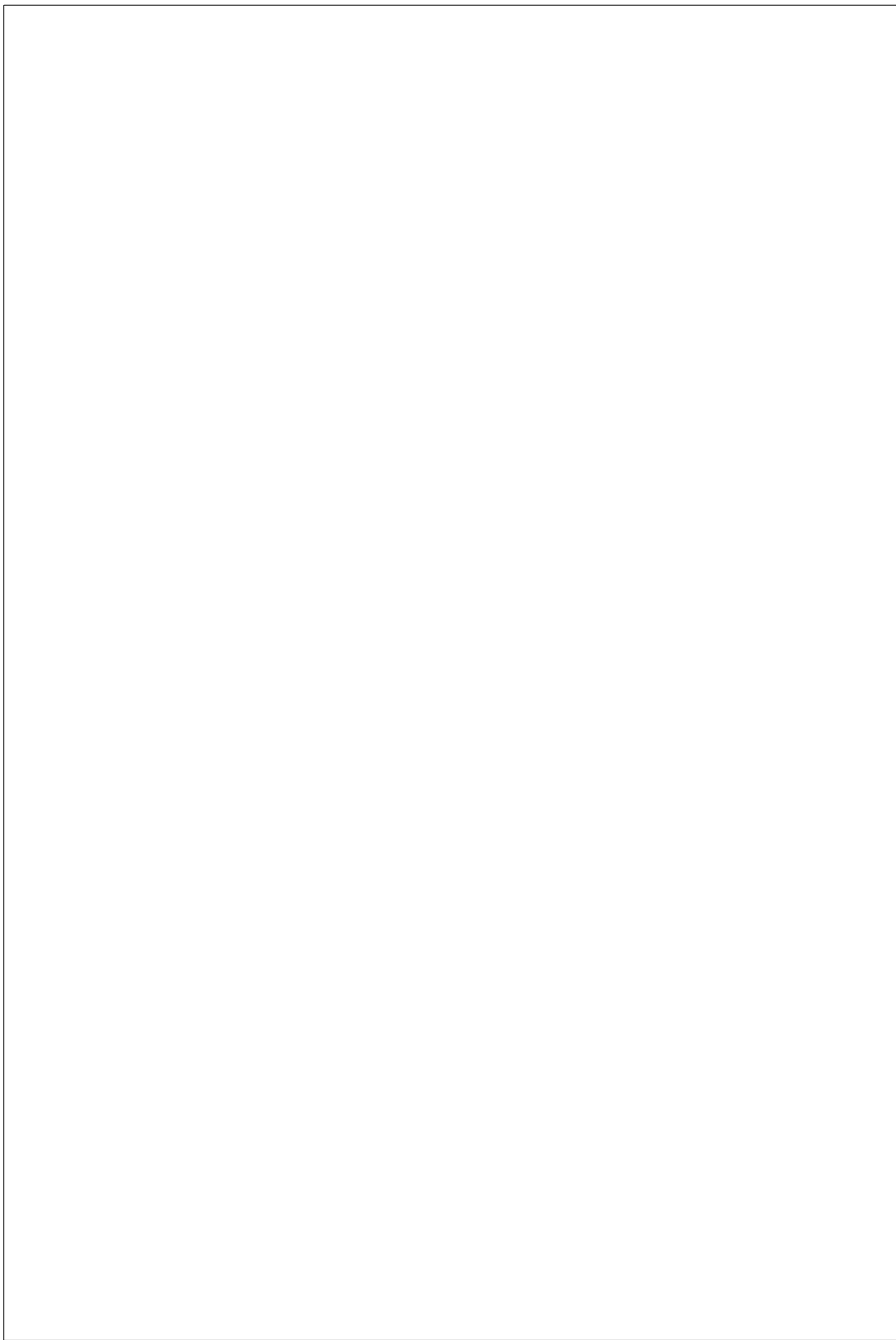
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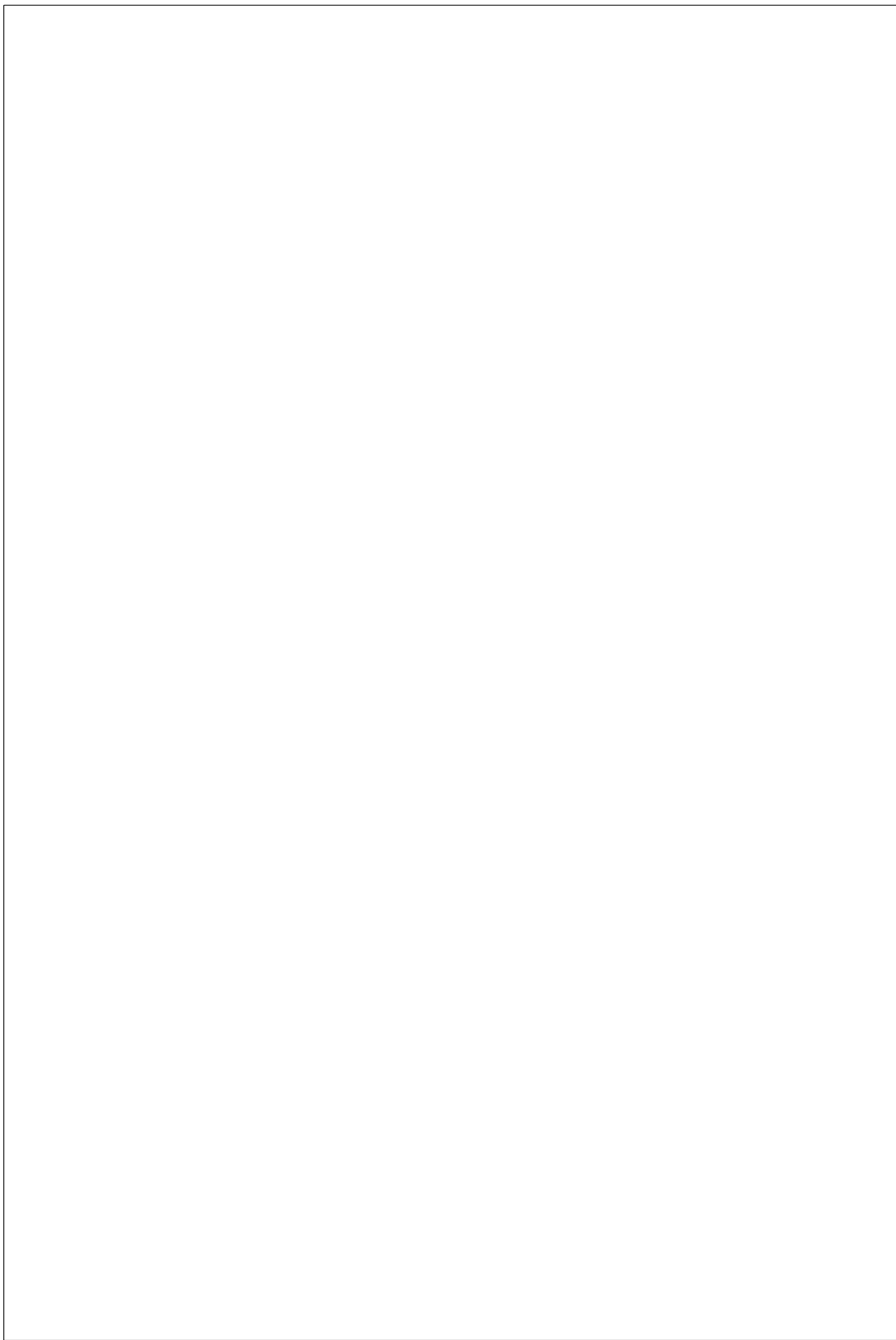


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## CONTENTS

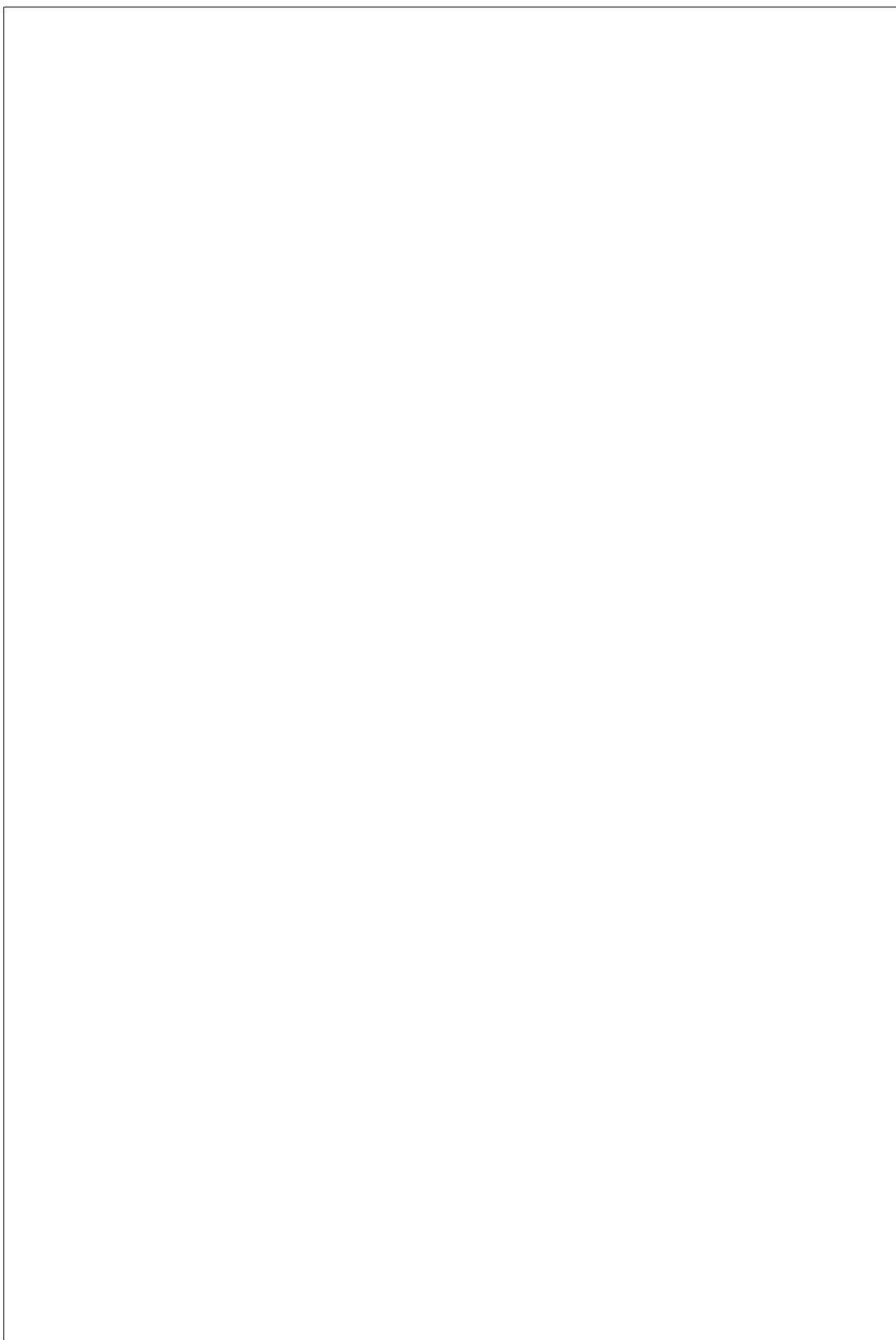
ONE	The Hazard	3
TWO	Families Rigged to Fail	27
THREE	Credentialing Versus Educating	44
FOUR	Science Abandoned	64
FIVE	Dumbed-Down Taxes	102
SIX	Self-Policing Subverted	125
SEVEN	Unwinding Vicious Spirals	139
EIGHT	Dark Age Patterns	161
	Notes and Comments	177
	Acknowledgments	223
	Index	225





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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Hazard

This is both a gloomy and a hopeful book.

The subject itself is gloomy: A Dark Age is a culture's dead end. We in North America and Western Europe, enjoying the many benefits of the culture conventionally known as the West, customarily think of a Dark Age as happening once, long ago, following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire. But in North America we live in a graveyard of lost aboriginal cultures, many of which were decisively finished off by mass amnesia in which even the memory of what was lost was also lost. Throughout the world Dark Ages have scrawled *finis* to successions of cultures receding far into the past. Whatever happened to the culture whose people produced the splendid Lascaux cave paintings some seventeen thousand years ago, in what is now southwestern France? Or the culture of the builders of ambitious stone and wood henges in Western Europe before the Celts arrived with their Iron Age technology and intricately knotted art?

Mass amnesia, striking as it is and seemingly weird, is the least mysterious of Dark Age phenomena. We all understand the harsh principle *Use it or lose it*. A failing or conquered culture can spiral down into a long decline, as has happened in most empires after their relatively short heydays of astonishing success. But in extreme cases, failing or conquered cultures can be genuinely lost, never to emerge again as living ways of being. The salient mystery of Dark Ages sets the stage for mass amnesia. People living in vigorous cultures typically treasure those cultures and resist any threat to them. How and why can a people so totally discard a formerly vital culture that it becomes literally lost?

This is a question that has practical importance for us here in North America, and possibly in Western Europe as well. Dark Ages are instructive, precisely because they are extreme examples of cultural collapse and thus more clear-cut and vivid than gradual decay. The purpose of this book is to help our culture avoid sliding into a dead end, by understanding how such a tragedy comes about, and thereby what can be done to ward it off and thus retain and further develop our living, functioning culture, which contains so much of value, so hard won by our forebears. We need this awareness because, as I plan to explain, we show signs of rushing headlong into a Dark Age.

Surely, the threat of losing all we have achieved, everything that makes us the vigorous society we are, cannot apply to us! How could it possibly happen to us? We have books, magnificent storehouses of knowledge about our culture; we have pictures, both still and moving, and oceans of other cultural information that every day wash through the Internet, the daily press, scholarly journals, the careful catalogs of museum

exhibitions, the reports compiled by government bureaucracies on every subject from judicial decisions to regulations for earthquake-resistant buildings, and, of course, time capsules.

Dark Ages, surely, are pre-printing and pre-World Wide Web phenomena. Even the Roman classical world was skimpily documented in comparison with our times. With all our information, how could our culture be lost? Or even almost lost? Don't we have it as well preserved as last season's peach crop, ready to nourish our descendants if need be?

Writing, printing, and the Internet give a false sense of security about the permanence of culture. Most of the million details of a complex, living culture are transmitted neither in writing nor pictorially. Instead, cultures live through word of mouth and example. That is why we have cooking classes and cooking demonstrations, as well as cookbooks. That is why we have apprenticeships, internships, student tours, and on-the-job training as well as manuals and textbooks. Every culture takes pains to educate its young so that they, in their turn, can practice and transmit it completely. Educators and mentors, whether they are parents, elders, or schoolmasters, use books and videos if they have them, but they also speak, and when they are most effective, as teachers, parents, or mentors, they also serve as examples.

As recipients of culture, as well as its producers, people attend to countless nuances that are assimilated only through experience. Men, women, and children in Holland conduct themselves differently from men, women, and children in England, even though both share the culture of the West, and very differently from their counterparts in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Singapore. Travel writers, novelists, visual artists, and photographers draw attention to subtle, everyday differences in conduct

rooted in experience, including the experience of differing cultural histories, but their glosses are unavoidably sketchy, compared with the experience of living a culture, soaking it up by example and word of mouth.

Another thing: a living culture is forever changing, without losing itself as a framework and context of change. The reconstruction of a culture is not the same as its restoration. In the fifteenth century, scholars and antiquarians set about reconstructing the lost classical culture of Greece and Rome from that culture's writing and artifacts. Their work was useful and remains so to this day; Western Europeans relearned their cultural derivations from it. But Europeans also plunged, beginning in the fifteenth century, into the post-Renaissance crises of the Enlightenment. Profoundly disturbing new knowledge entered a fundamentalist and feudal framework so unprepared to receive it that some scientists were excommunicated and their findings rejected by an establishment that had managed to accept reconstructed classicism—and used it to refute newer knowledge. Copernicus's stunning proofs forced educated people to realize that the earth is not the center of the universe, as reconstructed classical culture would have it. This and other discoveries, especially in the basic sciences of chemistry and physics, pitted the creative culture of the Enlightenment against the reconstructed culture of the Renaissance, which soon stood, ironically, as a barrier to cultural development of the West—a barrier formed by canned and preserved knowledge of kinds which we erroneously may imagine can save us from future decline or forgetfulness.

Dark Ages are horrible ordeals, incomparably worse than the temporary amnesia sometimes experienced by stunned sur-

vivors of earthquakes, battles, or bombing firestorms who abandon customary routines while they search for other survivors, grieve, and grapple with their own urgent needs, and who may forget the horrors they have witnessed, or try to. But later on, life for survivors continues for the most part as before, after having been suspended for the emergency.

During a Dark Age, the mass amnesia of survivors becomes permanent and profound. The previous way of life slides into an abyss of forgetfulness, almost as decisively as if it had not existed. Henri Pirenne, a great twentieth-century Belgian economic and social historian, says that the famous Dark Age which followed the collapse of the Western Roman Empire reached its nadir some six centuries later, about 1000 C.E. Here, sketched by two French historians, is the predicament of French peasantry in that year:

The peasants . . . are half starved. The effects of chronic malnourishment are conspicuous in the skeletons exhumed. . . . The chafing of the teeth . . . indicates a grass-eating people, rickets, and an overwhelming preponderance of people who died young. . . . Even for the minority that survived infancy, the average life span did not exceed the age of forty. . . . Periodically the lack of food grows worse. For a year or two there will be a great famine; the chroniclers described the graphic and horrible episodes of this catastrophe, complacently and rather excessively conjuring up people who eat dirt and sell human skin. . . . There is little or no metal; iron is reserved for weapons.

So much had been forgotten in the forgetful centuries: the Romans' use of legumes in crop rotation to restore the soil;



how to mine and smelt iron and make and transport picks for miners, and hammers and anvils for smiths; how to harvest honey from hollow-tile hives doubling as garden fences. In districts where even slaves had been well clothed, most people wore filthy rags.

Some three centuries after the Roman collapse, bubonic plague, hitherto unknown in Europe, crept in from North Africa, where it was endemic, and exploded into the first of many European bubonic plague epidemics. The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, conventionally depicted as Famine, War, Pestilence, and Death, had already been joined by a fifth demonic horseman, Forgetfulness.

A Dark Age is not merely a collection of subtractions. It is not a blank; much is added to fill the vacuum. But the additions break from the past and themselves reinforce a loss of the past. In Europe, languages that derived from formerly widely understood Latin diverged and became mutually incomprehensible. Everyday customs, rituals, and decorations diverged as old ones were lost; ethnic awarenesses came to the fore, often antagonistically; the embryos of nation-states were forming.

Citizenship gave way to serfdom; old Roman cities and towns were largely deserted and their underpopulated remnants sank into poverty and squalor; their former amenities, such as public baths and theatrical performances, became not even a memory. Gladiatorial battles and hungry wild animals unleashed upon prisoners were forgotten, too, but here and there, in backwaters, the memory of combat between a man on foot and a bull was retained because it was practiced. Diets changed, with gruel displacing bread, and salt fish and wild fowl almost displacing domesticated meat. Rules of inheri-

tance and property holding changed. The composition of households changed drastically with conversion of Rome's traditional family-sized farms to feudal estates. Methods of warfare and ostensible reasons for warfare changed as the state and its laws gave way to exactions and oppressions by warlords.

Writers disappeared, along with readers and literacy, as schooling became rare. Religion changed as Christianity, formerly an obscure cult among hundreds of obscure cults, won enough adherents to become dominant and to be accepted as the state religion by Constantine, emperor of the still intact Eastern Roman Empire, and then, also as the state religion, in territorial remnants of the vanished Western Empire. The very definitions of virtue and the meaning of life changed. In Western Christendom, sexuality became highly suspect.

In sum, during the time of mass amnesia, not only was most classical culture forgotten, and what remained coarsened; but also, Western Europe underwent the most radical and thoroughgoing revolution in its recorded history—a political, economic, social, and ideological revolution that was unexamined and even largely unnoticed, as such, while it was under way. In the last desperate years before Western Rome's collapse, local governments had been expunged by imperial decree and were replaced by a centralized military despotism, not a workable organ for governmental judgments and reflections.

Similar phenomena are to be found in the obscure Dark Ages that bring defeated aboriginal cultures to a close. Many subtractions combine to erase a previous way of life, and everything changes as a richer past converts to a meager present and an alien future. During the conquest of North America by Europeans, an estimated twenty million aboriginals

succumbed to imported diseases, warfare, and displacement from lands on which they and their hundreds of different cultures depended.

Their first response to the jolts of European invasion was to try to adapt familiar ways of life to the strange new circumstances. Some groups that had been accustomed to trading with one another, for example, forged seemingly workable trade links with the invaders. But after more conquerors crowded in, remnants of aboriginal survivors were herded into isolated reservations. Adaptations of the old cultures became impossible and thus no longer relevant; so, piece by piece, the old cultures were shed. Some pieces were relinquished voluntarily in emulation of the conquerors, or surrendered for the sake of the invaders' alcohol, guns, and flour; most slipped away from disuse and forgetfulness.

As in Europe after Rome's collapse, everything changed for aboriginal survivors during the forgetful years: education of children; religions and rituals; the composition of households and societies; food; clothing; habitations; recreations; laws and recognized systems of ownership and land use; concepts of justice, dignity, shame, esteem. Languages changed, with many becoming extinct; crafts, skills—everything was gone. In sum, the lives of aboriginals had been revolutionized, mostly by outside forces but also, to a very minor extent, from within.

In the late twentieth century, as some survivors gradually became conscious of how much had been lost, they began behaving much like the scholarly pioneers of the fifteenth-century Italian Renaissance who searched for relics of classical Greek and Roman culture. Cree and Cherokee, Navajo and Haida groped for fragments of lost information by searching out old records and artifacts dispersed in their conquerors'

museums and private collections. Jeered at by an uncomprehending white public of cultural winners, they began impudently demanding the return of ancestral articles of clothing and decoration, of musical instruments, of masks, even of the bones of their dead, in attempts to retrieve what their peoples and cultures had been like before their lives were transformed by mass amnesia and unsought revolution.

When the abyss of lost memory by a people becomes too deep and too old, attempts to plumb it are futile. The Ainu, Caucasian aborigines of Japan, have a known modern history similar in some ways to that of North American aboriginals. Centuries before the European invasion of North America, the Ainu lost their foraging territories to invading ancestors of the modern Japanese. Surviving remnants of Ainu were settled in isolated reservations, most on Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, where they still live. The Ainu remain a mysterious people, to themselves as well as to others. Physical characteristics proclaim their European ancestry; they may be related to Norse peoples. But where in Europe they came from can only be conjectured. They retain no information about their locations or cultures there, nor by what route they reached Japan, nor why they traveled there. (See note, p. 179.)

Cultures that triumphed in unequal contests between conquering invaders and their victims have been meticulously analyzed by a brilliant twenty-first-century historian and scientist, Jared Diamond, who has explained his analyses in a splendidly accessible book, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. He writes that he began his exploration with a question put to him by a youth in New Guinea, asking why Europeans and Americans were successful and rich. The advantages that Diamond

explored and the patterns he traces illuminate all instances of cultural wipeout.

Diamond argues persuasively that the difference between conquering and victim cultures is not owing to genetic discrepancies in intelligence or other inborn personal abilities among peoples, as racists persist in believing. He holds that, apart from variations in resistance to various diseases, the fates of cultures are not genetically influenced, let alone determined. But, he writes, successful invaders and conquerors have historically possessed certain crucial advantages conferred on them long ago by the luck of what he calls biogeography. The cultural ancestors of winners, he says, got head starts as outstandingly productive farmers and herders, producing ample and varied foods that could support large and dense populations.

Large and dense populations—in a word, cities—were able to support individuals and institutions engaged in activities other than direct food production. For example, such societies could support specialists in tool manufacturing, pottery making, boatbuilding, and barter, could organize and enforce legal codes, and could create priesthoods for celebrating and spreading religions, specialists for keeping accounts, and armed forces for defense and aggression.

Diamond's identifications of basic causes of discrepancies in power among cultures boil down to good or bad geographical luck. His resulting causes boil down to size and density of populations and consequent differences in technological and organizational specialization. All these factors can be quantified.

This analysis worked so well for explaining the historical outcomes of conflicts that ranged over all the continents, and



also on islands extending from the Arctic to the South Pacific, that Diamond hoped he had created the foundation for a genuine science of human history—a true, hard science, based on facts as solid and measurable as those underlying physics or chemistry, and as reliable for predicting future outcomes of conflict. It seemed to him that only a couple of loose ends needed tying.

One such was how cultures lost their memories. This was not hard for Diamond to explain as a consequence of *Use it or lose it*. He took as a vivid example the Tasmanians, who were nearly exterminated by invading Europeans in the nineteenth century. They were the most technologically primitive people to be recorded in modern history. They had no way of making fire, no boomerangs or spear throwers, no specialized stone tools, no canoes, no sewing needles, no ways of catching fish. Yet their parent culture, on the Australian mainland, had all these technologies. Presumably the Tasmanians did too, some ten thousand years previously, when they populated their island by traveling from the mainland over a prehistoric land bridge. Diamond remarks that a culture can lose a given technology for many reasons. Perhaps a certain raw material is in short supply; perhaps all the skilled artisans in a generation meet with tragedy. Whenever the Tasmanians lost an element of their culture, the loss would have been temporary had they still been in communication with the mainland, but because they were not, each loss became permanent.

The second loose end, however, threatened to unravel Diamond's whole fabric, as he recognized. According to his analyses, China and Mesopotamia, both of which had early and long leads over European cultures, should have securely maintained those leads, but did not. While neither experienced

the extreme of a Dark Age, both succumbed to long declines, insidiously growing poverty, and backwardness relative to Europe. They inform us, as do the unedifying terminations of all great empires in the past, that strong and successful cultures can fail. The difference between these failures and those of conquered aboriginal cultures is that the death or the stagnated moribundity of formerly unassailable and vigorous cultures is caused not by assault from outside but by assault from within, that is, by internal rot in the form of fatal cultural turnings, not recognized as wrong turnings while they occur or soon enough afterward to be correctable. Time during which corrections can be made runs out because of mass forgetfulness.

Mesopotamia, the so-called Fertile Crescent of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers—traditionally thought to be the site of the biblical Garden of Eden—in historical times has centered on the fabled city of Baghdad. For some nine thousand years, starting in about 8500 B.C.E., almost every major innovation adopted in ancient Europe had originated in or very near the Fertile Crescent: grain cultivation; writing; brickmaking; masonry engineering, and construction; the wheel; weaving; pottery making; irrigation. Just as Diamond's attempted science of human history would predict, the Fertile Crescent was the seat of the ancient world's earliest empires: Sumer, Babylon, Assyria.

Yet with all its seemingly unbeatable advantages, something went so wrong in the Fertile Crescent that, as Diamond says, it is now absurd to couple "Fertile Crescent" with "world leader in food production. Today's ephemeral wealth[,] . . . based on the single non-renewable resource of oil, conceals the region's long-standing fundamental poverty and difficulty feeding itself."

Diamond asked himself how so gifted a region could lose its early, long lead over Europe. By 115 C.E., Mesopotamia had been conquered by Rome and became a Roman province. This was no temporary setback. Over the course of the next eighteen centuries, the region was passed around from invader to invader, eventually falling into the hands of the British Empire and Western oil corporations; a new chapter, of conflicts over oil, is not yet finished.

Diamond says the lead was lost through environmental ignorance. In ancient times, much of the Fertile Crescent and eastern Mediterranean was covered with forests. But to obtain more farmland and more timber, and to satisfy the plaster industry's relentless demands for wood fuel, the forests were cut faster than they could regenerate. Denuded valleys silted up, and intensified irrigation led to salt accumulations in the soil. Overgrazing by goats, allowing new growth no start in life, sealed the destruction. The damage had become irreversible, Diamond says, by 400 B.C.E. What escaped earlier has been done in recently: "The last forests . . . in modern Jordan . . . were felled by Ottoman Turks during railroad construction just before World War I." Most of the last wetlands, the great reed marshes of southern Iraq, with their complex ecology of plants, mammals, insects, birds, and human beings, too—the "Marsh Arabs" who had occupied these lands for some five thousand years—fell to a drainage scheme undertaken for political reasons by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, creating another barren, salt-encrusted desert.

Northern and Western Europe pulled abreast of Mesopotamia, then surpassed it, says Diamond, "not because [Europeans] have been wiser but because they had the good luck to live in a more robust environment with higher rainfall, in



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