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Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet

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DEEP IN ADMIRATION

Ursula K. Le Guin

I HEARD THE POET BILL SIVERLY this week say that the essence of modern high technology is to consider the world as disposable: use it and throw it away. The people at this conference are here to think about how to get outside the mind-set that sees the technofix as the answer to all problems. It's easy to say we don't need more "high" technologies inescapably dependent on despoliation of the earth. It's easy to say we need recyclable, sustainable technologies, old and new—pottery making, bricklaying, sewing, weaving, carpentry, plumbing, solar power, farming, IT devices, whatever. But here, in the midst of our orgy of being lords of creation, texting as we drive, it's hard to put down the smartphone and stop looking for the next technofix. Changing our minds is going to be a big change. To use the world well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it.

Skill in living, awareness of belonging to the world, delight in being part of the world, always tends to involve knowing our kinship as animals with animals. Darwin first gave that knowledge a scientific basis. And now, both poets and scientists are extending the rational aspect of our sense of relationship to creatures without nervous systems and to nonliving beings—our fellowship as creatures with other creatures, things with other things.

Relationship among all things appears to be complex and reciprocal—always at least two-way, back and forth. It seems that nothing is single in this universe, and nothing goes one way.

In this view, we humans appear as particularly lively, intense, aware nodes of relation in an infinite network of connections, simple or complicated, direct or hidden, strong or delicate, temporary or very long-lasting. A web of connections, infinite but locally fragile, with and among everything—all beings—including what we generally class as things, objects.

Descartes and the behaviorists willfully saw dogs as machines, without feeling. Is seeing plants as without feeling a similar arrogance?

One way to stop seeing trees, or rivers, or hills, only as “natural resources” is to class them as fellow beings—kinfolk.

I guess I’m trying to subjectify the universe, because look where objectifying it has gotten us. To subjectify is not necessarily to co-opt, colonize, exploit. Rather, it may involve a great reach outward of the mind and imagination.

What tools have we got to help us make that reach?

In *Romantic Things*, Mary Jacobus writes, “The regulated speech of poetry may be as close as we can get to such things—to the stilled voice of the inanimate object or insentient standing of trees.”¹

Poetry is the human language that can try to say what a tree or a rock or a river *is*, that is, to speak humanly *for it*, in both senses of the word “for.” A poem can do so by relating the quality of an individual human relationship to a thing, a rock or river or tree, or simply by describing the thing as truthfully as possible.

Science describes accurately from outside; poetry describes accurately from inside. Science explicates; poetry implicates. Both celebrate what they describe. We need the languages of both science and poetry to save us from merely stockpiling endless “information” that fails to inform our ignorance or our irresponsibility.

By replacing unfounded, willful opinion, science can increase moral sensitivity; by demonstrating and performing aesthetic order or beauty, poetry can move minds to the sense of fellowship that prevents careless usage and exploitation of our fellow beings, waste and cruelty.

Poetry often serves religion; and the monotheistic religions, privileging humanity’s relationship with the divine, encourage arrogance. Yet even in that hard soil, poetry will find the language of compassionate fellowship with our fellow beings.

The seventeenth-century Christian mystic Henry Vaughan wrote:

So hills and valleys into singing break,
And though poor stones have neither speech nor tongue,
While active winds and streams both run and speak,
Yet stones are deep in admiration.

By admiration, Vaughan meant reverence for God’s sacred order of things, and joy in it, delight. By admiration, I understand reverence

for the infinite connectedness, the naturally sacred order of things, and joy in it, delight. So we admit stones to our holy communion; so the stones may admit us to theirs.

This talk was followed by a reading of a few of the author's poems.

THE MARROW

There was a word inside a stone.
I tried to pry it clear,
mallet and chisel, pick and gad,
until the stone was dropping blood,
but still I could not hear
the word the stone had said.

I threw it down beside the road
among a thousand stones
and as I turned away it cried
the word aloud within my ear
and the marrow of my bones
heard, and replied.

TAO SONG

O slow fish
show me the way
O green weed
grow me the way
The way you go
the way you grow
is the way
indeed
O bright Sun
light me the way
the right way
the one
no one can say
If one can choose it
it is wrong
Sing me the way
O song:
*No one can lose it
for long*

THE STORY

It's just part of a story, actually quite a lot of stories,
 the part where the third son or the stepdaughter
 sent on the impossible mission through the uncanny forest
 comes across a fox with its paw caught in a trap
 or little sparrows fallen from the nest
 or some ants in trouble in a puddle of water.
 He frees the fox, she puts the fledglings in the nest,
 they get the ants safe to their ant-hill.
 The little fox will come back later
 and lead him to the castle where the princess is imprisoned,
 the sparrow will fly before her to where the golden egg is hidden,
 the ants will sort out every poppyseed for them
 from the heap of sand before the fatal morning,
 and I don't think I can add much to this story.
 All my life it's been telling me
 if I'll only listen who the hero is
 and how to live happily ever after.

KINSHIP

Very slowly burning, the big forest tree
 stands in the slight hollow of the snow
 melted around it by the mild, long
 heat of its being and its will to be
 root, trunk, branch, leaf, and know
 earth dark, sun light, wind touch, bird song.
 Rootless and restless and warmblooded, we
 blaze in the flare that blinds us to that slow,
 tall, fraternal fire of life as strong
 now as in the seedling two centuries ago.

WHITENESS

*MEDITATIONS FOR MELVILLE**i*

Whiteness crossed the continent
 a poison fog where it went
 villages were vacant
 hearths and ways forsaken
 Whiteness with greed and iron
 makes the deep seas barren
 Great migrations fly daylong
 into whiteness and are gone

ii

Whiteness in its righteousness
bleaches creatures colorless
tolerates no
shadow

iii

People walk unseeing unseen
staring at a little screen
where the whiteness plays
an imitation of their days
Plugged in their ears white noise
drowns an ancient voice
murmuring to bless
darkness

INFINITIVE

We make too much history.

With or without us
there will be the silence
and the rocks and the far shining.
But what we need to be
is, oh, the small talk of swallows
in evening over
dull water under willows.
To be we need to know the river
holds the salmon and the ocean
holds the whales as lightly
as the body holds the soul
in the present tense, in the present tense.

FUTUROLOGY

I cannot break free from these iron stars.
I want the raspberry paw-pads of the fox,
but here are only claws, the Crab, the Scorpion,
great shining signs that slide across the sky.
I want the wisdom ignorant of wars
and the soft key that opens all the locks.
I want the touch of fur, the slant of sun
deep in a golden, slotted, changing eye.
O let there be no signs! Let fall the bars,
and walls be moss-grown, scattered rocks.
Let all the evil we have done be done
and minds lie still as sunlit meadows lie.

HYMN TO APHRODITE

Venus solis occasus orientisque, Dea pacifica,
 foam-borne, implacable, tender:
 war and storm serve you, and you wear
 the fiery tiara of the volcanoes.
 The young salmon swimming downriver
 and the old upstream to breed and die
 are yours, and the fog-drinking forests.
 Yours are the scattered emerald half-circles
 of islands, the lost islands. Yours
 are the sunken warships of the Emperor.
 Yours is each raindrop of the vast typhoon,
 and the slow swirl of pelagic polymers.
 The depths below all light are yours.
 The moon is your hand-mirror.
 Mother of Time and daughter of Destruction,
 your feet are light upon the waters.
 Death your dog follows you down the beaches
 whining to see the breakers break
 into blossom, into immortal
 foam-flowers, where you have left
 the bright track of your passing.
 Pity your fearful, foolish children,
 O Aphrodite of Fukushima.

As one of the most influential writers of our time, **URSULA K. LE GUIN** has stunned and stimulated many kinds of readers: from children to elders and from general readers to natural scientists, artists, humanists, and anthropologists. She is the author of many books, poems, and short stories, including *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed*. Among many honors and awards, she holds the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She is widely recognized for exploring the radical possibilities of society in her work—and the potential for varied ways humans might interact with the environment. She has consistently stretched Western environmental imaginations, inspiring what one scholar has called an “environmental paradigm shift.”

Notes

Given at the conference “Anthropocene: Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet” at the University of California, Santa Cruz in May 2014, this short talk sums up ideas that many of my poems of the last few years have expressed or have been groping toward.

1. Mary Jacobus, *Romantic Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).