



DESPAIR IS NOT A STRATEGY



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I.

One day through the primeval
wood
A calf walked home as good
calves should;

But made a trail all bent askew,
A crooked trail as all calves do.

Since then three hundred years
have fled,
And I infer the calf is dead.

Greetings, Porch friends!

It's the beginning of a new year, and many of us are feeling relief to see the back of 2016. The notion that the last twelve months were somehow extraordinary in the history of bad years is a widespread one, especially on social media. But if you talked with people who are used to being marginalized, it wasn't the end of days. This was the way things had always been. What was different was that privileged people were seeing an unveiling: power tends to corrupt, and holding onto power even when it harms the powerful is one of the most prevalent forms of that corruption. No surprises there, or at least none of us should have been surprised. At the same time, stories of fear tend to colonize our minds, and justifying the fears that keep us in the false comfort of isolation from our neighbors is one of the most prevalent forms of that colonization. Many of us saw too much pain in the past year. Many of us wanted to hide, to ask for a sabbatical from the world. The pain was real, but the way we talked about it wasn't always sane.

Amid the loss, and the empathy, and the anxiety, when we could, we were listening, waiting, watching, participating, dancing, celebrating, arguing, creating, loving. What we were left with was something else that shouldn't have been a surprise: a deepening knowledge that the deepest human need is for shelter. Shelter is not just food and a place to sleep; in fact I'd suggest that meeting such

physical needs is more like the scaffolding necessary for beautiful buildings to emerge. The deepest human need is for connection - with friends sharing their journeys toward becoming more human, with mentors who guide us a little further up the road, with a sense of purpose beyond ourselves, and with strangers who need and offer the shelter of difference and the gift of need. Perhaps the best thing to come out of a year that, no matter how distorted our view, felt to many of us like a pretty terrible time on the planet, is the fact that the experience of pain can encourage vulnerability. And when vulnerability is handled with care, the possibility of connection emerges. When we're in pain, we might learn one of the most courageous things of all: how to ask for help. I need help to discern the shape of the world around me. My mind is too easily immersed in the propaganda that says everything is getting worse. I owe it to myself and others to think carefully, to ask questions about the stories behind the headlines, to take responsibility for the impact of my being in the world, and be grateful for the gifts. That's what leads me to think differently about 2016.



In that light, what a year it's been! A peace agreement in Colombia, Michelle Obama's historic speech about gender violence, a whole six months in which the UK generated more energy from solar power than coal, a visit to Hiroshima by a sitting US leader, the release of *MOONLIGHT* and *LOVING*, two of the most profound, challenging, and hopeful movies about race, and sexuality, the victory at Standing Rock, the fact that more is now spent on foreign aid—for the first time—than it would require to end global poverty... The sun continued to rise, the earth turned, we loved each other, we argued with each other, we took more stumbling steps toward becoming more human.



It was a good year, in those respects at least.

I know I haven't mentioned at least one major story, but weeks after the upheaval occurred, it's still difficult to talk about. We knew something like this could happen, but didn't quite want to believe it. When it did take place, many of us were so stunned that it took a few days to pick ourselves up and face reality. We turned to each other, heavy-hearted, with an invitation.

"Let's listen to some of his records together. It's what he would have wanted."

The death of Leonard Cohen, for me, perhaps the most world-changing event of 2016, left a gaping hole in the soul of community. Thankfully, of course, the poetry and song he left behind were there to fill it, and now that we weren't taking it for granted anymore, perhaps we could let it lead us.

We needed such guidance, because a lot of us were already feeling depressed. Another poet, the one who likes to add stream-of-consciousness to Twitter, was apparently in the act of smashing up the playroom. He seemed fearsome, his words ugly, his distance from compassion obvious. What was more frightening was the fact that some other folk - about 25% of the US electorate - seemed to think he was the best thing since sliced bread. They were oblivious to the impact of his words and actions regarding folk who didn't look or sound like him; or they didn't believe those words; or they didn't care.

But the world continued to turn, and Leonard Cohen, whose poetry will outlast any president, was still speaking.

Of the US, Brother Leonard had written,

*"It's there they've got the range
The machinery for change,
And it's there they've got
the spiritual thirst"*

He's right. The US is a laboratory for democracy. The failure of conventional institutions to offer spiritual solace, wholeness, or connection has been exposed by the election. People will vote for someone who speaks so diabolically of marginalized others because he promises the security so obviously missing from our common life. The fact that he could still win when 75% of the US electorate didn't vote for him is both an indictment of the system, and a more hopeful sign than the catastrophizing of recent weeks. Three out of every four US American adults did not support Donald Trump, and many of those who did were drawn by fear, or a sense of loss, rather than malice.

And now, the need for conscious community is more obvious. The responsibility to stand in solidarity with people who are targeted for their gender or skin color or beliefs or sexual orientation or identity. The invitation to learn more about the world beyond the narrow circles of self and "people like us". The necessity of listening to the voices of indigenous people who understand and care for the land even when empires have tried to take it from them. To mourn with those who mourn. To build a bridge to a more hopeful future. John O'Donohue said that the duty of privilege is absolute integrity.

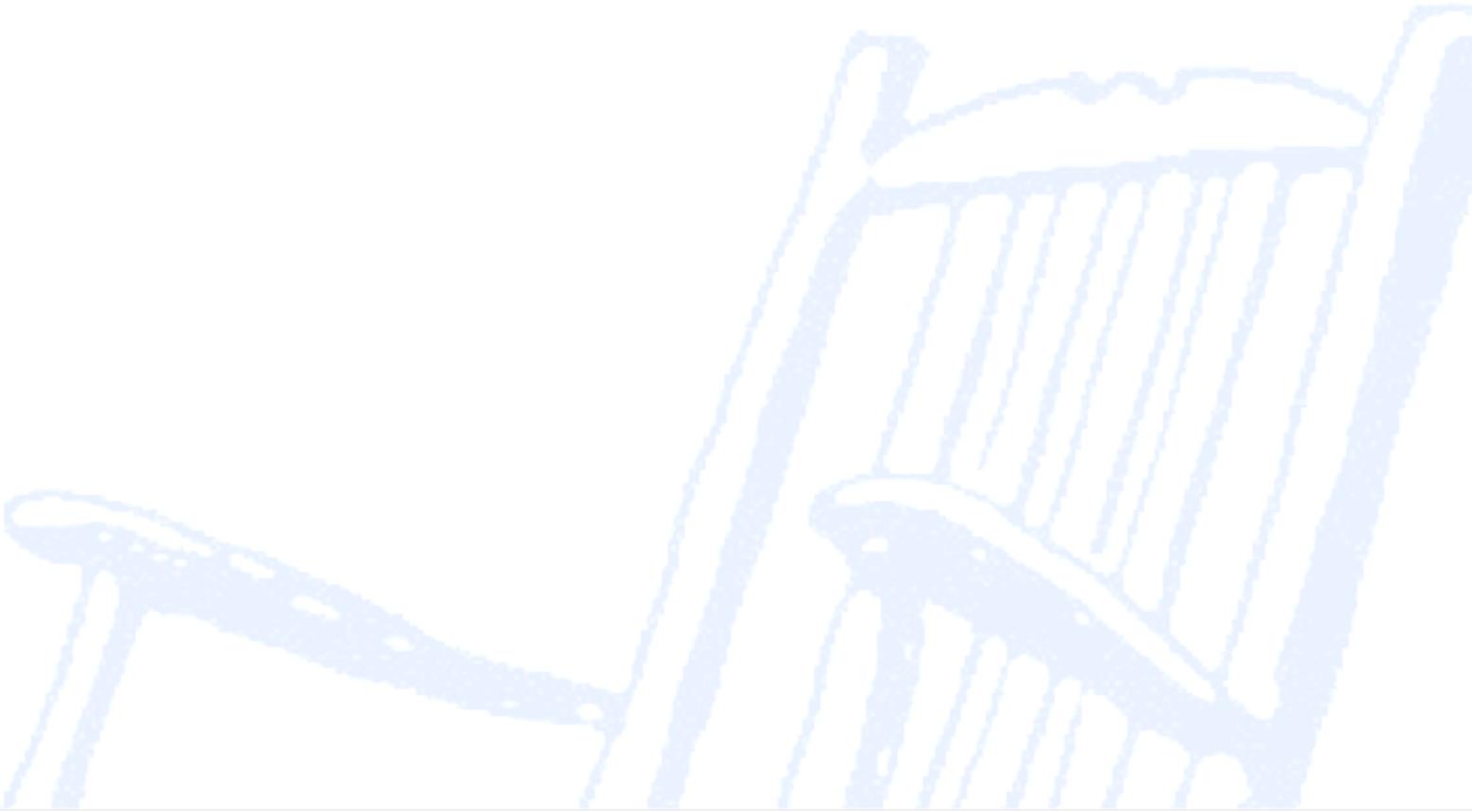
At *The Porch*, we want to live in the awareness of our gifts and challenges - while some of us are among the most privileged people in our society, some of us are also among the very people targeted by aggressive rhetoric and policy. Many of us are some mingling of both. And we know that there is more than enough suffering in the world today to occupy a lifetime of activism and the courage that sometimes seems out of reach.

But we also believe that the stories we tell will shape our lives. Because of that, we refuse to give in to despair, or to participate in the thoughtless propaganda that suggests everything is going to hell. In solidarity with targeted people, without demonizing our opponents, stepping into the beauty that will save humanity, at *The Porch* in 2017, we seek to learn, and live, community, connection, purpose, and healing.

Keep in touch!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gareth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "G" at the beginning and "H" at the end.

Gareth Higgins, Publisher / editor, *The Porch*



Despair is not a strategy:

On the death of a cat, the election of Trump, and action for the climate.

My ten year-old daughter, Annie Sky's black cat, Edgar Allen Poe, died on the same day that Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. Poe died from kidney failure, the result of eating poison left in the yard of her father's next-door neighbor who was apparently trying to kill some critter. Maybe a possum. My ex-husband found Poe paralyzed in his backyard and rushed him to the emergency vet, as my daughter and I snuggled on our couch, watching the early-evening election coverage on my MacBook Pro.

Much like the election results, this story is bizarre but true. That night, I was drinking an IPA, relishing the hoppy beverage after a day of teaching. At the time, I hadn't considered either the possibility that Poe might die, even less that Trump might win.

My daughter spends her days in a fifth-grade classroom at a diverse rural school, only a mile down the road from the liberal arts college where I teach. In the weeks before the election, she conducted an informal playground poll, concluding that only three people in her class had parents who supported Hillary. The rest were voting for Trump.

Even though we don't own a TV, Annie Sky had heard Trump's

racist, misogynistic, and discriminatory taunts, words she couldn't spell but actions she could recognize as wrong. She came home from school with questions: "Why is he so mean to so many people?" and "Why don't people like Hillary?" and "What will happen if he wins?"

She staked her claim as a Democrat, predictably aligning with my own political views, but she also talked about wanting to see an African-American president and a female president in her lifetime. Most days, she simply questioned how someone could be "mean" and have a chance at leading the country.

"Why can't I stay up to see who wins the election? When will I know if Poe is going to live?" she asked me, as I tucked the white comforter under her chin in the bunk bed she shares with her older sister. Tears pooling in her light blue eyes, she turned her body to the side, facing the wall adorned with pictures of cats, her companions for the long night.

* * * *

When the alarm rang at 6:30 the next morning, I pulled the comforter off her head, covered with strands of damp brown hair tangled from the hours of sleep.

"What happened last night?" she asked, blinking her eyes while posing a question about both Poe and the presidency.

"Trump won," I said, "and I haven't heard from Daddy about Poe."

Her blue eyes widened. Her mouth opened.

"How could they have elected that stupid man?" she said, invoking a word rarely used in our house and implying that "they" represented all adults. Somehow I felt implicated, guilty by association. Before she ate breakfast, I tried to explain the basics of the Electoral College. It felt like teaching bridge to a toddler at nap-time.

"Your only job today is to be kind," I said, knowing that other students in her school wouldn't share her feelings about the election. "As a kid, your job is to be kind to others and to remember what you believe in your heart."

As I graded papers at home that morning, stopping every few minutes to check Facebook or *The New York Times* for post-election coverage, my ex called to tell me that Poe had died in the night.

We decided that he would pick up Annie Sky the next day so they could bury the cat in his backyard. But I would tell her the news that afternoon.

When I picked her up after a running club at school, she jumped into the car with her brow sweaty and face flushed.

"It was so hot today!" she said, noting the 75-degree November weather, unusual for our home in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

"How did it go at school after the election?" I asked. "Did y'all talk about the results?"

"No, we just played and did our work," she said, retreating to the pragmatic perspective of fifth-graders.

"I've decided that Donald Trump can't hurt me, so I'm just going to live my life," she said. During the campaign, we had talked about how some students in her school might be worried about the impact of Trump's proposed immigration policies on their lives, but I realized that I had to tell her about Poe's death, rather than digress into the politics of the election. So I took a breath and delivered the news that mattered to her that day.

Looking in my rear view mirror, I watched her face crumble and tears spill onto her cheeks within seconds. As she cried, I pulled the car into a side parking lot. Somehow driving seemed like sacrilege, even if I

couldn't bring the cat back to life.

Between her sobs, she cried out one word, one syllable punctuating the warm air in our car: "Why? Why? Why?"

"He was my baby, he was my best friend, he was my cat, and he was only one year old," she said. "Why did he have to die? Why did this happen?"

Why?

That night, she asked me to come into the bathroom, where she drew a bath, sinking her thin body into the hot water. Sitting on the cold white tiles of our tiny bathroom, barely large enough for one person, I pulled my knees into my chest, my eyelids heavy from lack of sleep on election night, my emotions tangled with the death of a pet and the state of the country.

"Did I ever tell you about the death of my dog Chek?" I asked, when she came up for air, after submerging her tear-stained face into the water. Annie Sky knew about my allergies to cats and dogs, one of the reasons she cherished having a cat at her dad's house, but I had rarely shared that I once was a pet person. Now seemed like the appropriate time.

In the 1970s in Alabama, my siblings and I had a dog named Chek, whom my brother named after a non-brand soda at our local grocery store, I told her.

The knock-off soda cans had a bold check mark on the can, but for some reason, the brand was spelled with four letters, rather than five.

"Well, Chek died on Good Friday after being hit by a car, and I was convinced that he was going to rise from the dead the next day, just like Jesus!" I said. "I was in the sixth grade and knew that it was improbable, but if Jesus could do it, why not Chek?"

She raised her eyebrows, amazed that I could be this irrational.

"You were in middle school, and you thought a dog would come back to life like Jesus? Wow."

As the bath water cooled, I imagined her recalibrating her odds of emotional success in life, as compared to her mother's naiveté.

"I'll always remember that Poe died on election day," she said. "But I don't think he will ever come back from the dead. That's crazy talk."

When my seventeen-year old daughter Maya came home, she seemed undisturbed by the news of Poe's death, as by this time in her life, she had faced the deaths or disappearances of five different felines. But she did share that her principal began the day by announcing a message of civility in this rural high school.

"She told us on the intercom that our job was to be kind to each other and respect each other's differences," my teenager said. "And she also said that the president of this country doesn't define who we are in our school. We define our school by how we treat each other."

Two hours later, with Annie Sky asleep in the lower bunk, I heard the bedroom door open, and my older daughter emerged, mascara smudged on her face, cheeks red.

Tilting her head with a smile, she said, "I just had my cry about Poe." Then off she went to wash away the evidence of her loss.

* * * *

The next day, I entered a classroom filled with undergraduates who were scheduled to practice environmental education lessons to teach eighty second-graders the next week. The students looked hung over, their faces drawn and tired, although I knew that they had not been up partying, but rather forecasting their futures in the environmental field under the next administration. This was their first presidential election: they weren't participating in a mock high-school poll, but a real contest in a battleground state.

So we talked for the first few minutes of class about their

experiences watching the election results and their fears about the intersection of the environment with immigration, healthcare, marriage equality, and more. Then I told them that in one week, they would enter a classroom at the elementary school to teach, and the parents of at least half the students, probably more, had voted for Trump. Their job was to connect these students to the natural world around them, regardless of political views.

"Despair is not a long-term strategy," I said, as if saying the words aloud would make them come true. That afternoon, as we practiced the lessons, smoke from forest fires, some of them deliberate arson, filled the air of the valley where we live. Thousands of acres of wildfires burned across our region, magnified by the extreme drought and high temperatures.

Slightly more than one inch of rain had fallen in four months, the most extreme drought in more than a hundred years, in the hottest year on record. My students knew that these extreme weather patterns were predicted to increase given the impacts of climate change.

Because of the potential for unhealthy air quality, they needed to prepare for teaching inside the elementary-school classroom, as well as outside on the nature trail. That week, my daughter's running group was cancelled due to code-red air quality, making it unsafe for children to be outside.

The morning of our lessons, however, while thousands of acres burned, the winds shifted, and blue skies emerged for the first time all week. One of the second grade teachers e-mailed me: "We can go outside today!"

And we did. My students led four classes of seven year-old children - Caucasian, African-American, and Latino - in explorations of nature around their schoolyard. Magnifying glasses in hand, students crouched on the ground, observing blades of grass, insects, and soil, and documenting their findings in nature journals. Young and old, they huddled together, connecting to each other, connecting to one place.

* * * *

The cavernous banquet room began to fill with elders: A woman in a royal blue shirt and navy pants shuffled to her seat by slowly picking up one foot after the other; a man with a snowy-white beard took a front-row seat, and two other women chose the back row because "the sound is always better in the back," they told me.

The week after teaching at the elementary school with my students, I drove to a local retirement community to talk about my research on the work of churches to confront climate change. My host had confirmed that the audience members would hold diverse political views:

the crowd of about fifty senior citizens included retired professors, Episcopal priests, doctors, scientists, librarians, and social workers – active thinkers with the resources to live at this comfortable community, where you could glimpse the assisted living center in the background of the cozy cottages where many folks began their stay.

Through stories, I shared the news of people of faith working to protect the climate, like the organization GreenFaith advocating divestment from fossil fuels; Earth Ministry partnering with Native Peoples of the Northwest to block construction of coal export terminals; Muslim mosques adding solar panels to their places of worship; and clergy joining the protests at Standing Rock. But I also told them about the majority of my own students and their fear for their future given the election results.

One gentleman in the front row raised his hand, “In the wake of the election, how can you have any hope for the environment?”

From the wide-open look on his wrinkled face, I could tell that he wasn’t chiding me. He didn’t have an answer in mind when he asked the question.

So I paused, because I don’t have one answer, as I struggle

with the question for myself, my daughters, and my students.

“Despair is not a long-term strategy,” I repeated, “especially for those of us with resources like education, money, and time to call out injustice while we also talk with those who differ from us.”

“While I don’t have the answer, I do know what gives me hope,” I said, sharing the story of my student Kelsey Juliana, who is the lead plaintiff in a case suing the federal government over climate change. In collaboration with Our Children’s Trust, this case, *Juliana et al. vs. United States*, asserts that failure by the U.S. to protect youth from greenhouse gas emissions is a violation of their constitutional rights.

Indeed, in the days after the election, my student, who is taking a semester off to participate in the court case, hosted an after school camp for young people who want to learn how they can take climate action to protect their future. I know that Kelsey feels great despair about the election results, but she doesn’t have time to stay in that mindset. There is too much at stake to ignore the radical responsibility that we must exercise for our neighbors and the places we call home.

When I came home from the retirement community, I tucked Annie Sky into bed, once again pulling the white comforter underneath her smooth chin and giving her our special kiss: one kiss on the left cheek, the right cheek, the lips, the nose, and a final one on the lips.

“I’m still sad about Poe, you know,” she said, “It’s the one-week anniversary of his death.”

“I know honey,” I said, although I admitted that the anniversary had escaped me.

“I’m still sad – like *really* sad,” she said. “But I am trying to move on with my life.”

I tried not to grin at the gravity of her words, the wisdom from one single decade of life.

“I think that if I got a kitten for my birthday next week, that would help me,” she said. “But even if I don’t get a kitten, that’s what I’m going to work on. That’s my goal.”

In that evening hour, kneeling by her bedside, I felt a small part of what activist Van Jones describes as an “army of love,” emerging from his call to surround and protect the most vulnerable as we face an uncertain future. And just because I could, I gave her our special kiss, one more time, and turned out the light on another day.

II.

But still he left behind his trail,
And thereby hangs my moral
tale.

The trail was taken up next day,
By a lone dog that passed that
way;

And then a wise bell-wether
sheep
Pursued the trail o'er vale and
steep,

And drew the flock behind him,
too,
As good bell-wethers always do.

And from that day, o'er hill and
glade.
Through those old woods a path
was made.



AT
THE
EDGE
OF
MNI SOSE:
HOPE,
PRAYER &
REVOLUTION

Teresa Pasquale Mateus

At 6 a.m. the call goes out, as it does every morning, "Relatives, wake up! It's time to pray! This is what you're here for!"

The sun isn't yet ready to peak over the prairie but the cold and the sacred call to ceremony gets bodies moving, even though drumming, singing, and whooping went late into the night.

I begin to move around in my sleeping bag, slowly unzipping as I reach for my second, third, fourth, and fifth layer of clothing, much of which made up my makeshift pillow from the night before. I wipe the condensation off the top of my bag—the only place my breath touched in the night, leaving dew where my internal oxygen hit freezing air.

I wrap myself in my scarf and the warm wool covers where sleeping bag once warmed that delicate part of the neck. I make my way to morning prayer at Oceti Sakowin Camp, Standing Rock.

It's the day before Thanksgiving.

The Oceti camp sits on treaty land, owned by the Standing Rock Sioux from 1851—stolen by the American government, like much other native property, as soon as it served a purpose. This camp is Lakota community come to full life—a circle which daily begins around the Sacred Fire moments after the call to prayer.

Two hours of prayer around the fire end with a communal march to the water's edge, the very thing the Oceti Sakowin, or Seven Council's Fire (of the Lakota people), fight for. Chants ring out, "Mni Wiconi! Mni Wiconi," which translates to, "Water is life." The last time the Seven Council's Fire was gathered before this Standing Rock standoff was at The Battle of the Little Bighorn, also known as Custer's Last Stand, and by Lakota people as the Battle of the Greasy Grass. They remind us at camp that the Lakota won.

An elder stands up and reminds us that this water, the water that we pray for and over and with, has a very specific name: Mni Sose. We call out, "Mni Sose," as I can hear another chant come from the other end of the crowd. There is thumping and there are guttural sounds; it's a language I have heard before. I look down and see a gathering of Maori warriors sharing their prayer offerings in their native language to the water. They traveled thousands of miles to share in this moment of powerful resistance with the Lakota people and their allies. Prayer closes with words from the elders, tobacco offered to the water, and the call that is both affirmation and "amen" — the word, "A'ho!"

Thanks and Giving

The next day we march at the water's edge in a different place for a different reason. It is the day that the settlers of this land have named Thanksgiving, but for the native people in community it is the anniversary of pain, genocide, and a history rewritten.

We march to Turtle Island, the ancient burial ground of the ancestors of this land, atop which sits a militarized crow's nest where privately funded militia sit with full police regalia, water cannons, tear gas and all the accoutrements you would need to commemorate this holiday if you wanted to actually approximate its true origins. The irony of the moment is not lost on our circle of water protectors, hundreds lining the edge water that separates the protectors from the ancestors.

I stand with a white cross on my arm with a heart in its center. This was the decided upon emblem by the mental health team earlier that day to mark ourselves as crisis support should events turn dangerous, as we knew from the past few months could happen quickly.

I stand with a combat veteran, an Army medic, there to support the first aid response. He's equipped his team for response to possible hypothermia and they have a make-shift

ambulance set up to transport people out with emergency wounds. "I wanted to serve my country to protect the people," he explains, "and here I feel I can do that."

The water protectors built a wooden bridge that they completed with hundreds of hands to help in less than an hour and soon it is bent over the water, holding firm on the other side, and ten, then twenty, then fifty or more protectors head onto Turtle Island, with signs and banners and prayers of remembrance for those sacred souls who lay under the ground. Water cannons spray down on those closest to the top of the hill and despite their bodies shivering in the cold and wet, still they stand strong.

Hours go by and they continue prayer and ceremony on the island while the rest of us support from the other side of the water. Those of us in crisis response roles hoping and praying that things don't escalate. In the end it seems that the militia on the hill didn't want blood on their hands on the day they call Thanksgiving.

We all rejoin at the bottom of the hill, six hours after we began, and gather in circle for closing prayer. Sage moves its way through the circle—smudging as a cleansing practice. We all turn towards the hill and say thank you to the men on the hill. Even though they sit on the graves of loved ones and ancestors, even though they are paid by private oil business to be there, and even though less than a week earlier they had barraged the community with hours of suffering and abuse, we say a collective "Thank you," as we raise hands into the air to wave in their direction. We give thanks for not spraying (most of) us with water hoses in hypothermic cold. It is thanks for not shooting us with rubber bullets. We give thanks thanks for not arresting indigenous women and women of color—as was most common practice on the front lines. We give thanks, that, at least today, none of the medic trucks are necessary. In that way it was a day of thanks and a day of giving—just not the way the history books remember. It is being remade in every way. In these moments, in these days. In this stand at Standing Rock.

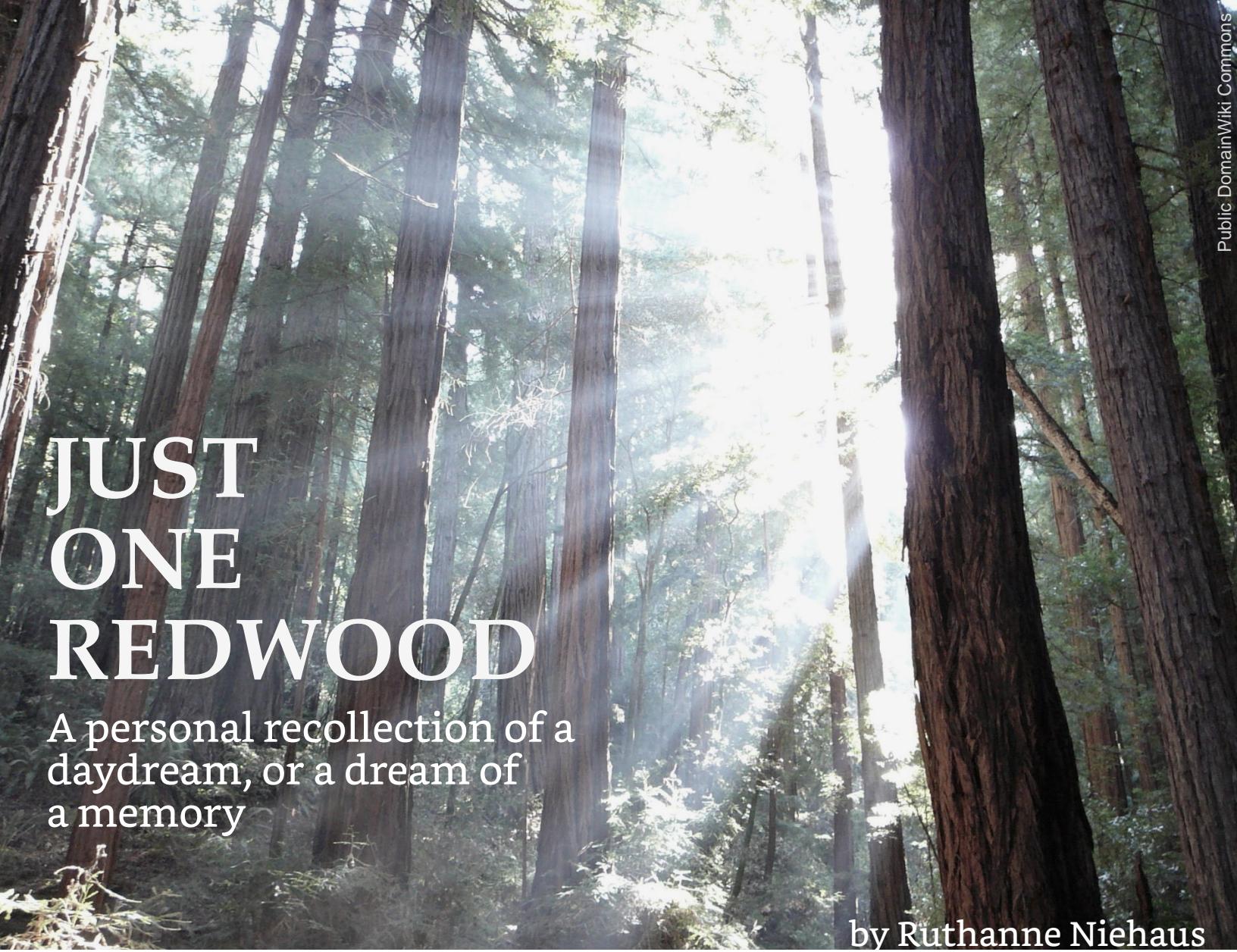
Wake Up!

The refrain in my head ended that day, and sits with me still. Both beginning and ending each day, each moment of peaceful resistance, and everything in between, we are all reminded, "Relatives, wake up! It's time to pray! This is what you're here for!"

It's time to wake up! Our world needs us to be awake. It is time for sacred practice—a recollection of the ceremonies that inform our own traditions. This is what we are here for. I am called into deeper practice for having served in community with those that stood before and stand still at Standing Rock—in action and contemplation. I am grateful to the witness and example of the Lakota people at the front lines of resistance. Their stand is the new paradigm of hope, prayer, and revolution. They are remembering something ancient and calling us to be stirred to that ancient part of ourselves. They are putting back together the kind of community that honors its ancestors, and lives in such a way that generations to come will be able to remember it with respect.

This is what we're here for.

Sitting Bull (1831-1890), Lakota Sioux Leader
who led a resistance among indigenous
people against the U.S. Government in a
conflict over South Dakota gold.
Image Credit: Library of Congress



JUST ONE REDWOOD

A personal recollection of a daydream, or a dream of a memory

by Ruthanne Niehaus

One redwood in a California grove talks to herself. Two voices are heard: One voice comes from the tallest tip-top branches and the other from the widest of trunks merged deep in the ground.

Tip Top: (calls down) HELLOOO!

Deep Trunk: (answers with joy) Well, hello! So nice to hear from you!

Tip Top: Yes, and thank you. The sky is glowing peace today! I just noticed a breeze of wisdom go through our branches.

Deep Trunk: Mmm, please tell me about it. The ground around our trunk is sweet and solid, but breezes are a treat down here.

Tip Top: The breeze said you and I are one. That is quite obvious, but isn't it glorious still that even those beings with cameras have to juggle several shots just to capture us? The spirit of the breeze said I am close to heaven, and you are earth. I find the simplicity of the truth quite striking.

Deep Trunk: It feels great to all my roots to stretch and see from different perspectives. Do you remember that one human being who came back two days in a row last Spring? She was a blonde grandmother! She leaned in all directions. I felt her earnest heart.

Tip Top: Not sure I can recall her.

Deep Trunk: She read every word of the park ranger signs as if they were a sacred vow. The history of our Lady Bird Grove and the three presidents who were here showed her the connections of reverence and action. People believed these places were sacred, and presidents have been designating national parks since 1872. She chanted the Heart Sutra of the Buddha and the cells of wonder inside many beings smiled.

Tip Top: Oh, yes, now I remember, I was lulled into a sweet ancient memory and the ancestors drew near. The wisdom of their hearts create sparkling warmth as each scene permeates the present moment. It was so luscious my thoughts vanished. I love it when a direct experience of the moment is wildly sensual and erases ordinary time.

Deep Trunk: Exactly! She felt the history of this grove just like that. The grandfather who didn't meet even the first of his six grandsons was here leaning on the tree over there. He died before they were born but is nearbyalways. His nickname was Tree—really I couldn't make this up. Every time she says the word tree, he perks up in spirit form even if she is talking about us!

Tip Top: Oh, yes he is persistent and quite a comic. Ancestors do continue to breathe with us. They're always present offering their support and heart wisdom. The light from way up here atop our 300 foot trunk shines on our eternal puzzle, showing us how we all fit. I wonder how each person may be inspired and immerse their own lives in heaven

and earth. Many grow silent with the thrill of walking in our very own Redwood grove.

Tip Top and Deep Trunk: (in unison) Let us speak up together and show our beauty so our visitors can see their own.

Within this moment,

Within this one breath

We are descendants of conifers and dinosaurs

We are 144 million years old.

Within this moment,

Within this one breath

We are five or even fifteen feet wide

Bring a friend and stretch.

Within this moment

Within this one breath

We are 300 feet tall

Step back and see.

Within this moment

Within this one breath

Our roots live in harmonious interconnections

When change occurs—new life grows

*Within this moment
Within this one breath
We lose our lower limbs
protecting the ferns that love us.*

*Within this moment
Within this breath
We awaken soul growth
We inspire your balance.*

*Within this moment
Within this one breath
We clean more air than any other
Forest on the whole planet*

*Within this moment
Within this breath
A bridge leads to a grove
dedicated by presidents.*

*Within this moment
Within this one breath
We heal ourselves
Our red tannic acid protects us.*

*We are the Redwoods
We are grateful to have been saved
Our very essence is to offer you beauty
Our very essence is to help you reach deep and to stand tall.*

*Within this moment
Within this one breath
Our view is wide
Our perspective deep

Within this moment
Within this one breath
Our ancestors are here

A council of spirit to serve you*

Mystery is our true nature right here in the natural world. Awe and wonder guide each movement of air, earth, water and fire contained in us all. The personal really is political when it is fueled by inspiration and silence, and transformed into action on behalf of the magnificence of our world. A surprising fact: The rings inside our massive trunks don't always complete concentric circles inside of us. Sometimes our rings are uneven and create new, unforeseen pathways. Please, bump gently into the opportunities of life. Step back. Look and feel from all perspectives. And begin again.

"Where flowers bloom so does hope."

-Lady Bird Johnson

III.

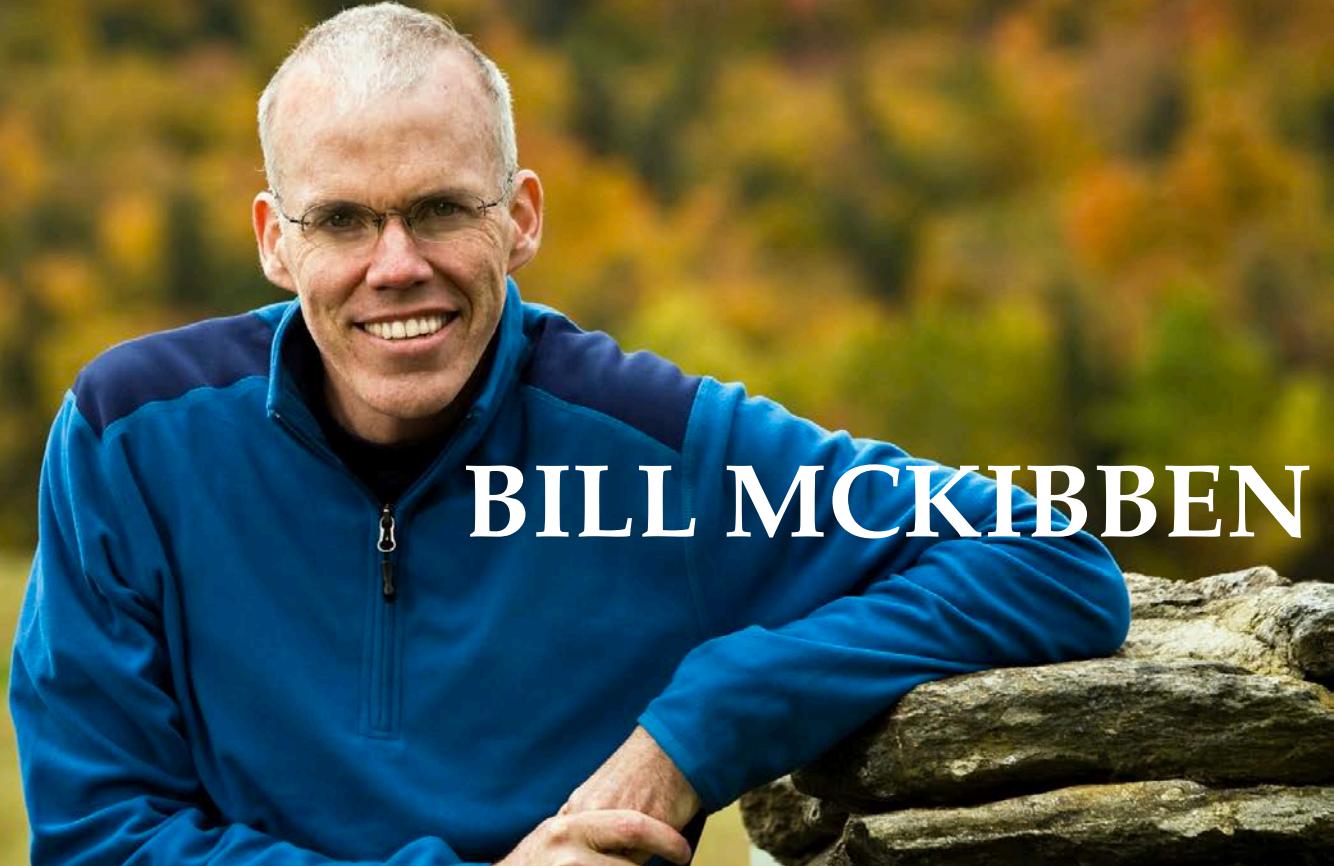
And many men wound in and
out,
And dodged, and turned, and
bent about,

And uttered words of righteous
wrath,
Because 'twas such a crooked
path;

But still they followed—do not
laugh—
The first migrations of that calf,

And through this winding wood-
way stalked
Because he wobbled when he
walked.

A CONVERSATION WITH



BILL MCKIBBEN

BILL MCKIBBEN is a writer and activist, and co-founder of 350.org. This conversation took place at the Greenbelt Festival in England.

Gareth Higgins: So, Bill, you got in here this morning. You flew overnight from the U.S. and you're leaving again on Monday. You have a busy life.

Bill McKibben: Yeah. A very different life than the one I thought I would be leading. I am, by craft and background, a writer, which is in many ways the most solitary of occupations, which is fine by me. Left to my own druthers, sitting in a room and typing is my just about favorite thing. But life in the last ten years, because of this need to build this movement around climate change, has been very different

and very odd and very busy, sometimes much too busy.

GH: So, at this point today, what's your thirty-second answer to the question, what do you do?

BMcK: I think I'm more an activist than a writer at the moment. Ten years ago, along with seven college students, I founded a thing called 350.org that became the first big grassroots climate movement around the world that operates now all over the world. I'm still a volunteer at it. I've never really had a position or anything, but that's what fills up most days. Every day I help in some way or another with that.

Gareth: Looking back, when was the first time you can remember noticing that there are some things in the world that need to be changed?

BMcK: Well, that's a good question. I'm sure it was through church youth group growing up. When we were young, we'd take service trips to the poorest parts of the United States when we were in fifth and sixth grade and spend a week working. As a good suburban boy, it was interesting and pretty shocking to see the poorest parts of the country. And, of course, in the context of church, it struck hard with good moral meaning of some kind.

Gareth: Where were you growing up and what was your childhood like?

BMcK: I sort of grew up all over. But by the time I was in junior high school, we were living outside Boston in the suburbs. And actually it was kind of useful too. I grew up in the suburb of Lexington in Massachusetts, which in a way was a kind of interesting place to grow up. No offense to the British, but Lexington was pretty much where the world's first revolt, the revolt against colonialism, imperialism, and that sort of thing began in 1775. My summer job in high school was giving tours of the battle green. I'd put on my tricorne hat, the tourists came, and I would get to explain to them the story of how the British took a licking in Lexington, and I think it's one of the reasons that I've never confused being dissident with being unpatriotic. I think maybe it's one of the things that's helped me get around a little bit of some of the conservative/liberal dichotomy in a sense.

Gareth: What were the politics in your family when you were younger?

BMcK: Sort of mainstream liberal Democratic politics in the 1960's and '70's, and my father was a business reporter and business editor. So, it was not a radical household by any means. He worked for *Business Week* magazine all the time that I was growing up. This was the heyday of the mainline Protestant Church

in America and I was just whatever flavor happened to be available depending on where we lived. So I was baptized Presbyterian, grew up in the United Church of Christ, and ended up a Methodist, because that's what was there when I eventually moved to the mountains.

GH: So, how did this dissident thing begin to then manifest beyond taking people on tours to tell them the revolutionary story?

BMcK: So, my first job out of college was writing for *The New Yorker* magazine. I, sort of through a fluke, ended up at *The New Yorker* and wrote *The Talk of the Town* column for some years. Every other week or so, I'd write the political editorial in the front. A wonderful man, a great man named Jonathan Schell and I would share this duty.

I had always been kind of interested in politics—this was in the era of Reagan and of the U.S. involvement in Central America and things like that. At the same time, it was the beginning of what we now think of as the homelessness epidemic in America, the beginning of when there were large numbers of homeless people showing up on the streets. At the time we thought it was a kind of crisis that was going to be addressed; we didn't know that it was going to become a endemic feature of public life. To write for *The New Yorker*, I spent a fair amount of time living on the streets in New York, and I also started a shelter for homeless people in the basement of my church.

I was going to quite a wonderful church, Riverside Church, and the pastor was a man named William Sloane Coffin who was a wonderful, wonderful preacher. But it was a church that was very committed to justice of all kinds and hence uninterested in charity and thinking them as quite opposite things. And I remember

it was hard work to persuade William Sloane Coffin that we should have a homeless shelter in the basement, because [he believed] that just put a Band-Aid on things, which of course it did, but [the shelter] seemed important too. So, those were the kind of early years before I started doing what I do now, before I moved out of the city into the very deep wilderness.

GH: So, is there a through line to today when you look back at your twenties and maybe your early thirties? And I'm also interested to know, along with Coffin, who were your mentors?

BMcK: *The New Yorker* is where Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* and where Jonathan Schell published *The Fate of the Earth* and John Hersey published *Hiroshima* and a number of things. So it was, in those days at least, extremely progressive. Thinking about turning points in one's life, for me I had never really understood sort of what "the Holy Spirit" referred to until it dawned on me that in my life it had been that force which caused one to pick one book off the shelf instead of another one almost at random and read it. Because I'm a reader and a writer, books have always been extremely important to me. In my boyhood, it was somewhat clichéd - by far the most important books were the C.S. Lewis *Narnia* books and did as much to form my character as anything else.

GH: In what way did the *Narnia* books shape you?

BMcK: Well, I mean, I think by giving one an actual workable image of what God might in some way be like. A talking lion!

GH: I'm thinking of it being asked of Aslan, "Is he safe?" And the answer given is, "No. He is **good**."

BMcK: Not a tame lion, absolutely. And

then in my mid-20's, my future wife handed me two things. One was the Stephen Mitchell translation of *Job*. I mean, it's by far the most gloriously written book in the Bible, but the Stephen Mitchell translation really makes that clear. She also handed me the first book I read by Wendell Berry, who went on to be the person that really changed how I viewed the world in profound ways and became a great friend and mentor and things as well.

GH: How has Wendell Berry changed you?

BMcK: This is the one useful thing you can take from this conversation of mine is his name, a Kentucky farmer, essayist, poet, and novelist. I read his essays first and it's possible that I've come to love his novels best of all. Above all, [he's a] sort of "writer of community." The instant that I began reading him, I began to understand some of the inchoate longings and frustrations of one's life.

I came of age in the suburbs of the United States in the 1970's, so, really at the close to the absolute pinnacle of consumer culture as one could. If you think about that process, the process of consumer culture is really about the process of making one as much a kind of hyper-individual as it's possible to be, because if you're worried about other people, other things, whatever, it would interfere with the efficient process of consuming more, right? So the point of high consumerism is to be about **you**. And I had obviously had some sense that that wasn't exactly right, hence homeless shelters and hence church youth groups and hence the things that really matter. But in an intellectual sense, it very much came together starting to read Wendell Berry's extraordinarily fine take on all of this.

And it was at the moment when I, for other reasons, was moving to out into the

wilderness. *The New Yorker* magazine had been taken over by a newspaper baron named Si Newhouse, and he fired Mr. Shawn, the longtime editor and the greatest editor of the 20th century in America. He had been editor for forty years or something and I was twenty-six maybe. It annoyed me, so I quit. My parents were appalled and really everybody was appalled, because it was really as good a job as you could have in American journalism.

But in retrospect it was the smartest thing except for marrying my wife that I ever did, because it would have been very easy to spend my whole life there doing the same thing. And instead, I suddenly didn't have a job and certainly couldn't live in New York without one. I suppose I could have gone to work at *The Times* or something I suppose, but it was a great opportunity to move from the middle of Manhattan to the absolute middle of the biggest wilderness in the American East, the Adirondack Mountains. And life changed very powerfully again.

GH: I want to ask you about how it changed. But before we get to that, let's talk about what some people call spiritual practices for self-care and nurture and looking after yourself. Do you identify with the notion of spiritual practices? What are the things you do that you know nurture your own soul?

BMcK: So, I can't do most of the ones you're "supposed" to. I'm literally the world's worst meditator! The thing where you're supposed to count your breaths or something, I can get to about two and a half before – forget it. So, for me, for the last thirty some years anyway, it has involved being outdoors in the woods for an hour or two if I possibly can, whenever I'm home, walking, hiking. My greatest vice or passion of all is cross-country skiing, which is a wonderful rhythmic exercise that does drop me into as close as

I ever get to contemplative place. But those are poor excuses for spiritual practices I fear.

GH: And you know that that's not true, right? I mean you're friends with Wendell Berry. He would tell you that your walking in the woods **is** your spiritual practice.

BMcK: Probably, probably, but half the time I just—I'm not skiing, I'm thinking about how fast I can go down the next hill or something anyway. It's not very deep a lot of the time. But I do find that when I'm writing, that's the only place that problems get solved; and it comes fairly spontaneously.

GH: So, you went to live in the wilderness. What did you do next?

BMcK: Well, two things. One was, you got to know the community that we were living in and it was a tiny community, a town of 300, and it had been an age since anybody had moved there from the outside. And yet, there was no problem of "joining in." It's been my experience ever since that as long as one is willing to not to tell people what to do, but to help out with whatever is already going on, then everyone is happy to have you around.

So, I was soon teaching Sunday school and whatever and it worked fine. And that was great fun to get to know that community, get to know the people in it and feel a fairly strong sense of community. And I also was trying to learn how to write. Learning how to write a book is a very different experience from writing 1000-word pieces for magazines. It takes an entirely different set of chops. And so I wrote. The first book I wrote was a book called *The End of Nature*, which was also the first book about climate change for a non-scientific audience.

I was twenty-seven when I was writing it,

and when I look back on it now, there are parts of it that are quite jejune and that I'd rewrite if I could. But because it was the first and because the timing was just perfect, it did well. It came out I think eventually in twenty-four languages, and it was a best seller in a lot of places. And the way that book writing goes, if you write one and it's successful, then that sort of gives you the license to write the next three or four that don't have to be successful. So, I wrote the next two or three or four over the next decade, and it was really a wonderful decade. In my thirties I was sitting at home and writing and skiing and raising my daughter, and it was really a sublime period in a lot of ways.

GH: Can I ask you about the temptations of ego when you write a successful book?

BMcK: Yes, it's a good question. And I had been very lucky up until then, because when I'd been writing all that *Talk of the Town* stuff for *The New Yorker*, in those days it was all anonymous and that was a very good way to start writing, because if I had written four or five hundred pieces for *The New Yorker* as a twenty-one or twenty-two year-old and had my name on all of them, I would have been a kind of minor celebrity in New York. Instead I was completely anonymous. I think I was lucky that by the time I wrote a book that did well, I was living pretty far out in the woods.

Of course my neighbors were unimpressed by any of this. That was good. But there's no question that ego, that even mild fame is a seductive thing, and I think actually it got worse for me later on when we were doing this activist stuff that required me to be out in public much, much more. With a book, generally you write a book, you go on what's called book tour for a couple of weeks, which is a grim process in many ways. But then it's over and everybody forgets about your

book and you do, too. You're moving on to the next one.

GH: But when you're kind of a celebrity activist, it never stops?

BMcK: My mistake for many years in this climate change stuff, I knew it was the biggest story in the world and the most important thing, but I thought that it was an argument that was ongoing. Ten or fifteen years in, I figured out that that was not the case; that it was a fight instead of an argument, and that the fight was with the very powerful fossil fuel industry and that they had endless amounts of money, and that we would need to build movements to counteract that.

So, the question became how to build one where there really wasn't very much of one that existed, and we didn't know what we were doing. But we started this organization called 350.org, and probably because of timing and because there was a vacuum, we had enormous success early on, which really has continued throughout. At first I was the public face, and by default of much of the climate change movement building stuff. That was necessary for a while, because for organizing purposes there had to be something to kind of draw people in the tent.

And so I was on the road as many nights as not for four or five years, six years and it was very hard in a lot of ways, including the sort of ego one, which is unpleasant thing for me to deal with. At some point three or four years ago, I realized that it was not only unhealthy for me, but unhealthy for the movement to have a focus on particular leaders. We didn't have Dr. King—maybe if we did, that would be better—but since we didn't, then it was much more useful to imagine a movement, the way that we were trying to imagine the new energy system. Not with a few centralized power plants, but

with millions of solar panels on millions of roofs and—or imagine a kind of widespread resistance with thousands upon thousands of leaders in local places all over the place doing amazing work that we then could knit together, thanks to the Internet. That was really the movement that we'd been helping build and those people really were out there.

So for the last three or four years, I've thought of my work mostly as a kind of emcee, helping introduce other people to other people. Many days the most useful work I do is on Twitter: if someone writes something good or someone is doing some good protest or something, it's a very easy way to get it noticed. And when I go to speak to now, I try to make sure that part of it is bringing other people up on stage. You asked the right question. You got to my particular problem.

GH: So, you realized it wasn't healthy for you or the movement. It seems to me that a lot of movement leaders **never** realize what's not healthy for them or the movement. Do you know what it is that helped you realize this is unhealthy? Sometimes the voices of loved ones can point that out to us, sometimes mentors, sometimes we read it in a book, and then sometimes there are some people who just never discover that. They burn themselves out and their movements die.

BMcK: So, my wife is a great help in many ways, and so is my dog, a tremendous help. Absolutely, no question. Very good at being present in the moment. And I'm reasonably good. I'm a reporter by background and sort of an observer. And so, it's true that one can see that [burnout] is a possibility, but some part of me knew that one of my goals in all of this was to make myself obsolete, not just because there were other people to do this work and these young people that I had started 350.org with. They're incredibly capable, more capable than I am in many ways.

But the idea of "This is the one activist [we need]!"...that can't be a long lifetime preoccupation, because if it is we will have lost. I'm afraid that there'll still be plenty to work on around poverty and war and hunger fifty years from now. But if we're still fighting the basic battle around climate change fifty years from now, we will have lost.

There'll be nothing left to fight for. If we don't turn the tide quite quickly, it won't be turned. And that is one of the dangers with this particular issue, because it's the first truly time limited issue like this we've ever faced. One does feel a kind of moral imperative to keep battling hard all the time and not take time off, and I grapple with that on occasion.

GH: So this then may be a counterintuitive question given the urgency of the cause that you've been captivated by. How have you learned to say no to requests, and demands [that could divert you from what you should be doing, or from living healthily]?

BMcK: Yeah, I mean, I probably get maybe ten invitations a day to come speak some place. So, obviously you can turn down 90% of them, and you'd still have to go speak someplace every day. And for a while, that was more or less what I was doing, because we were in this movement building phase that had to happen. But I've gotten much better at saying no and at finding other people all the time to do things.

GH: So, an invitation comes in, you might pivot it?

BMcK: Absolutely, yes, yes, yes, yes, and absolutely with the conviction that it's much healthier. The other thing that I've learned to do that's been very useful is to say, "No, I'm not coming to wherever you are, but it would be no problem for me to go on Skype for ten or fifteen minutes and

talk with you that way and in fact it would be low carbon." And so, I can do five times more talking that way than any other way and that's been a kind of technological gift I must say.

GH: To move to the art that nurtures you, let me ask you your favorite movie?

BMcK: My favorite recent movie, was *Spotlight* that won the Oscar last year, partly because it was about the *Boston Globe* where my father worked at the end of his career and partly because it's about noble newspaper men. That was in recent years I think my favorite thing I've seen in a long time.

GH: And music and literature that nurtures you?

BMcK: I listen to a lot of music, but the stuff I return to the most is probably the Great American soul music of the early 1970's. People like Marvin Gaye, Nina Simone, for some reason that's very "church" for me. And as a reader, I'm hopelessly – sit me down with the box of cereal in the morning and I'm reading the back of it... I consume vast amounts of junk information along the way and the Internet has been a real problem in that sense, because it's an endless supply of useless stuff that you don't actually need to read, but you could, so you might as well. And I have to say we could not have done the organizing that we've done [without] the Internet.

We couldn't have built 350.org without it. There's no possible way. And yet, I find it in certain ways has wrecked my peace of mind. I've spent – we all may have spent half our life on a task answering email that didn't exist for the first fifteen or twenty years of my career and it feels like it must have been such an incredibly luxurious stretch of time to not have that. But on the other hand we wouldn't have the movement we have without it.

GH: My last question to you, Bill: are you an optimist or a pessimist?

BMcK: This obviously is a question that I think about a lot or I used to anyway, and because people ask it all the time. And if you happen to know a lot about climate change, the worst thing that's ever happened in the world, if you happen to be a semi-authority on it, then what people are really asking you is, "Is everything going to be all right or not?" And I don't know. I mean we waited a long time to get started dealing with this. The momentum of physics is strong. So, if I want to be a pessimist about the future, I can do it on strong grounds.

But if I want to be an optimist about the future, I can figure out some grounds for that too. The movement to do something about it is global and rising, and it's beautiful to watch and it comes with them. We also have incredibly talented engineers in this world who figured out how to do things like solar panels and windmills that could, if we did them with vigor, get us at least somewhere we needed to go.

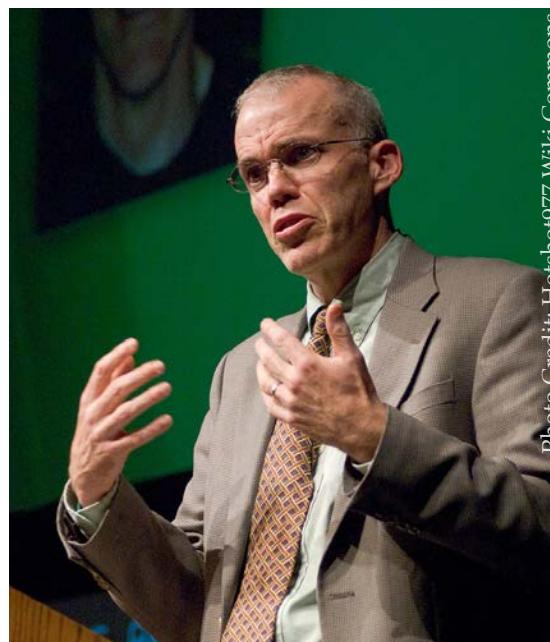


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But I think the real answer is that I don't spend any time anymore trying to figure out the answer to this question. The job seems to be just to get up in the morning and figure out what one can do with maximum effect that day to change the odds a little bit. Even if one only changes the odds a tiny bit in the course of one's life—the thing that we're gambling over—the stakes are so high that a small change in the odds is a useful life's work.

GH: People want to know what they can do, and knowing that this group of people will never again be assembled in this combination, what's one thing you'd like to leave us with?

BMcK: I've become convinced that at least with this particular great crisis, the only useful answer is people coming together to form a movement big enough to counterbalance. So, movements require us to be citizens. Most of the work of movements goes on weekends and after hours. And yet it's the highest work and the one that we've most abandoned in a lot of ways. You can see that abandonment right now in my country, the incredibly sad spectacle of some significant percentage of people lining up to vote for Donald Trump, which is just another way of just saying forget it, this is too hard, let somebody else deal with it. And on the other hand, there was the great pleasure this year of watching lots of people, young people especially, line up behind Bernie Sanders who had the most beautiful political slogan of the modern age. His slogan was "Not Me, Us" which strikes me as the most useful kind of mantra that were I able to deal with mantras and meditation might be one that I chose.



IV.

This forest path became a lane,
that bent and turned and turned
again;

This crooked lane became a road,
Where many a poor horse with
his load

Toiled on beneath the burning
sun,
And traveled some three miles in
one.

And thus a century and a half
They trod the footsteps of that
calf.

VISION

MONA HAYDAR

I was recently invited to perform my poetry at Bard College. It was only a few days after the election, and many students there were feeling depressed about the state of the world. Their sad, even fearful energy was palpable. I recited my poems from memory and shared anecdotes from my life. Laughter. Tears. And in the room, real alchemy began. The poems and stories became a vortex through which we channeled our fears, anxieties, and frustration. We felt our hearts rising. We witnessed our connectedness. We felt our minds let go of some fear. We started to relax. It was a deeply connective and restorative gathering. The audience reception was sublimely generous. One young man especially stood out to me because he was particularly engaged. Audience engagement is a central part of my performances and he and I went back and forth many times over the course of those seventy minutes. A few themes circled repeatedly as I shared my poems and invited reflections on them. They were wildly juicy and delicious. We spoke of our complete interconnectedness; of confident humility, of balancing our feminine and masculine energies to heal the world, and of the task of visioning the kind of world we want, and the place we each have in building it. The young man asked, very sweetly and innocently, "How can I do this in my life? How do I tap into these more esoteric and metaphysical things you're talking about? Practically, I mean."

I paused for a moment before responding. Sometimes, standing at the mic can leave me feeling like I have to be *on* all the time, but I've learned after thirteen years of being on stage that a big part of being truly myself there is that I can take the time I need to allow what needs to come through. I don't need to force anything. And the authentically true and honest thing that needs to emerge for that interaction, for that moment, always does.

So I was silent for maybe half a minute. I thought about what brought me to the place where I find myself now in my spiritual discipline. I realized in a very non-abstract way that I owe all my insights to my elders, at whose feet I am committed to sitting. People of vision, people who are weathered by life, with spirits full like storehouses preparing for winter. They are people full of vision ready to transmit all the goodness they have. The answer I would give the young man came to me: it had to do with the difference between visions and ideas and sitting in intentionally intergenerational circles. So many in my generation and those which follow have little to no contact with true elders. I shared this with the audience, with that young man. It's not an easy answer to give or receive but I believe it was the right one. It feels important to call on the youth to sit at the feet of elders.

And it feels equally important to call upon elders to invite and welcome the youth into their space. Wisdom belongs to all of us but if we don't take the transmission of vision seriously, in a few generations how will we know where to find it? It doesn't matter what tradition true elders sit in, either. A true elder holds the wisdom of the universe in their heart. How many saints from across the traditions taught of visions which seemed to flow from the same sources? They were all tributaries of the same river. In a very real sense, if you read Thomas Merton, you've read Rumi. If you've read St. Francis, you've read Hildegard. If you've read Hafiz, you've read the Buddha. This isn't to conflate all their teachings and to say that they didn't each come with very special messages, nor that we can do without reading any of them. But it is to say that essentially, at the most basic level, they were magnetized by a deep abiding love for that which is ineffable and beyond. They poured out what came from a place of unity, rather than uniformity.

A friend recently told me a story of when she was stuck in a corporate job that she hated. She knew she wasn't fulfilling her purpose here on Earth, but it paid the bills. She had come to believe that in order to be grateful, she needed to keep doing what she was doing. On an otherwise ordinary day at work, an internationally renowned guest arrived who was working on a campaign with her employer. She had been assigned as a liaison of sorts to this person and they got to talking. He told her after just a few minutes of conversation that she didn't belong in that job, that she had great things waiting for her in the world, that she needed to leave her position and pursue her true purpose. He told her that when she was serious about pursuing her dreams, he would help her, but first she needed to be brave and decide to do it. It didn't take much time after that meeting for her to finally make the decision to leave. She's now actively pursuing her dreams. She made a major life decision because a visionary helped her see possibility. These visionaries walk among us and incite us to be our best selves. Sometimes they are our children who encourage us to activate our long dormant imaginations—which may be lead us to the truest vision of all. Sometimes they are elders

whom we respect, at whose feet we sit to soak up some of their light, sometimes simply by being in their presence.

We are a society obsessed with great ideas and inventions and yet we tend to have little vision. Visioning is a process rather than a moment. It is the entirety of a journey which may or may not lead to a sudden moment of inspiration. Visioning is the depth and breadth of understanding, the way a tree's roots reach far down *and* out into the core of the Earth of knowing: into something which is ever-present, ancient, and primordial. We are told so often to think outside the box, and while this may bring us some innovative ideas, true visioning means reaching into the wisdom of our hearts. There, we can find what we just simply *know*, and trust that knowing instead of casting it aside as unscientific, unquantifiable, or even ineffable. Visioning leads us to trust the part that thinks outside the box because we know that the box doesn't actually exist!

“A true elder holds the wisdom of the universe in their heart.”

True visioning builds and grows the world into a more beautiful version of itself. Vision is doing away with foundational dysfunction instead of creating or producing something which simply slows, stagnates, or bandaids the problem: curing the disease instead of treating the symptoms. Vision is seeing the world beyond its maladies and loving it so deeply that its best manifests itself for you through time and space. Vision is seeing the world for its potential for goodness and love instead of profit. Vision is about community and not the individual, and it comes with intrepid wisdom that is passed down in families, communities, and lineages. It is reported that Einstein was said to have visions rather than ideas. He saw entire formulas and their expositions at once. He didn't just see one piece and then work on them from there. Visioning is non-linear in the way that ideas are bound to time and space. Western society is obsessed with liminal and linear space; we seem to have accepted that we exist in some sort of mathematical and scientific equation. I think therefore I am? I would like to offer to you, my beloveds, that *my community is* and therefore *I am*. My grandmother Earth is and therefore I am. My elders are therefore I am.

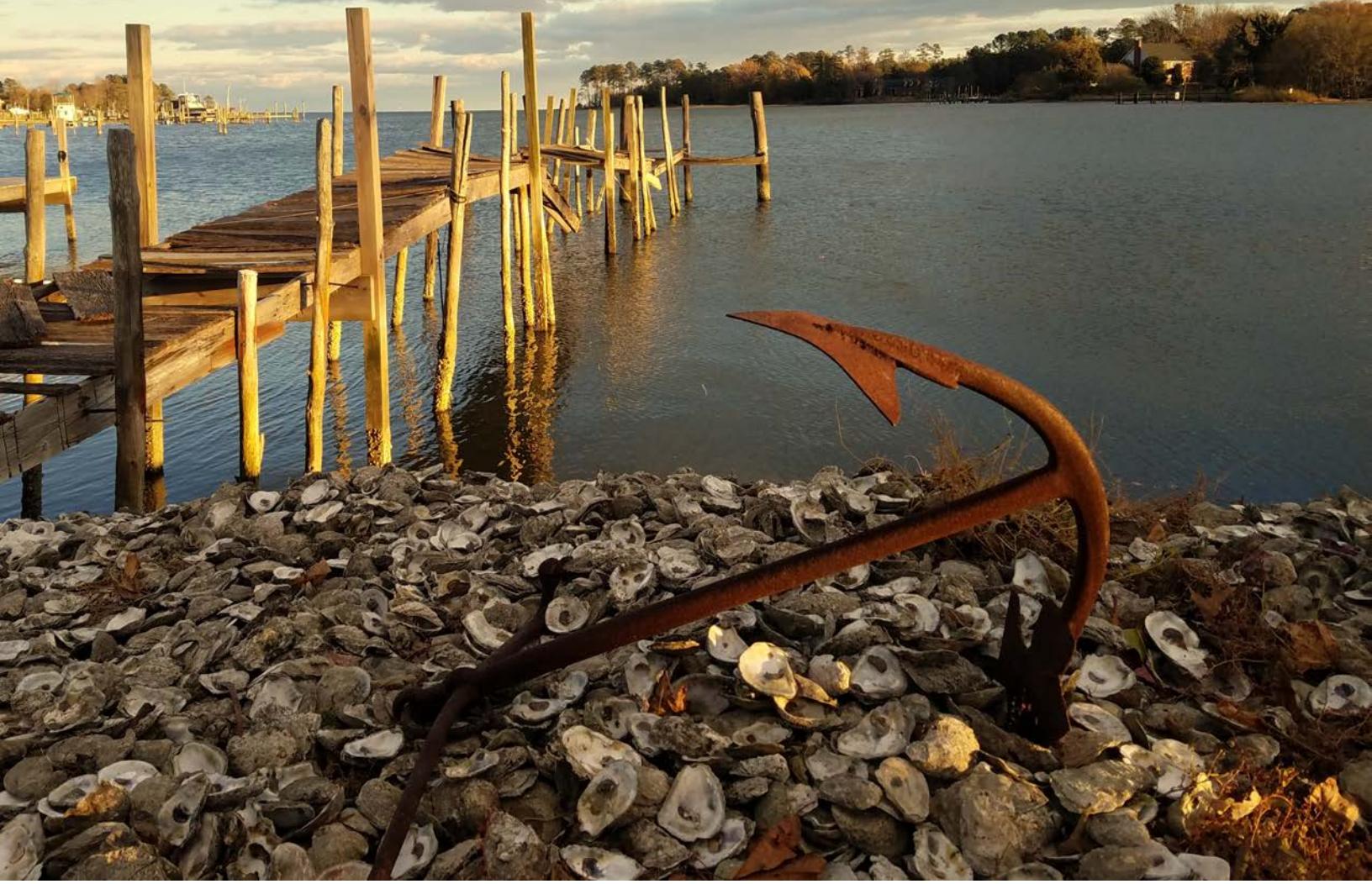
We are a society so wrapped up in our great ideas, our latest and most efficient technology, and yet we come to be more and more insular and separate from one another. Our inventions make it so that we believe we are beyond the need for physical community, community which grounds us and gives us purpose and meaning. The prophet

Muhammad lived a life of vision, receiving revelation at a mountaintop where it is said that boulders, rocks, and stones could be heard greeting him. Animals came to him to complain of the injustice and oppression their masters inflicted on them. In waking visions he saw the future and his community was not shocked when they came to fruition. This is how true elders and sages lived and continue to live, with the depth and breadth of vision. Not problem-solving or critical thinking, but vision. We are still so capable of this. We are still capable of these mythical interactions with the world around us if we open ourselves to our potential as people of vision. As people of vision, we can see the world as an extension of ourselves and ourselves as an extension of it. We are never separate. In vision we see the total interconnectedness of

everything, the complex, tactile, textured, layered sweetness that is compacted when the realization strikes, "Ah, I am the medicine I need. I am the beloved I desire." And beyond, perhaps as far as, "I am the remedy to all the world's woes." I know it sounds like this might put too much weight on us as individuals, but I have found that when we live as the medicine, beloved, as the remedy—we attract others living this way, and they become our community. Then together we can be a healing balm soothing to any weight we might feel carrying this burden of healing the world. This, my friends, is so much sweeter than dwelling in the alternative of depression, powerlessness, and complaint. I choose community. I choose vision. I choose this love.



Gustave Doré's made of the batanic vision. Dante's Divine Comedy. Public Domain



Friends-

As the sun was setting yesterday I came across this anchor and pier up in St.Mary's County, Maryland...the juxtaposition of the two seems powerful to me.

-Michael Citrini, Friend of The Porch

I WANT TO KNOW WHAT LOVE IS

steve daugherty

It was the third and final evening at our international sales conference in Nashville. The main session speakers gave rags-to-riches homilies, shouting at us, whipping us up into a foam for the company and its wares. The daily electives helped us sharpen our skills, increase our motivation and fealty, and become an unstoppable global force who dominated the market one defenseless customer at a time. We, from dozens of countries the globe over, ate like kings for those three days. I learned how to say “profit” in Afrikaans. I got a Russian girl’s phone number.

And now there would be this one last main session before we would each be released into the world, like a direct-sales Kraken.

We’d been promised something more than just a closing plenary. They’d said it would be more of a closing *show*. A finale. Something unforgettable. *If you’ll dig in, engage, absorb to the very end, they kept saying, you’ll be rewarded with an act guaranteed to delight.*

We could only speculate. And we did so cynically. After all, we were a roomful of door-to-door vacuum cleaner salespeople at our annual world conference. What closing act could possibly cap that spirit? We assumed it would be some discount Vegas act. Maybe something less. Surely *we*, thousands of door-knocking dirt-sucker hustlers

**You can say what you want
but you don't know what you want
I'll say what you want...**

– *Cold Slope, Wilco*

bandying about at the Grand Ole Opry as to how we intended to become richer than our physicians when we got back to our homes were the superstar magicians and stand-up comics they’d already hired.

The final evening we gathered at our hundreds of round tables, having saved our best finery for this moment. We shoveled Chicken Cordon Bleu into our faces as the conference host told us for the last time how amazing we were, and how much more amazing we would become if for the next few years we’d work seven days a week. *Like truly happy people do.*

“You all have done so well,” intoned our host. “The world better watch out, because this room is full of the kind of success others can only imagine.” We whooped and clapped with our mouths full. “And now, as promised, our surprise entertainment for the week.” We looked at one another, already planning to head back to the hotel rooms and get a last bender in. The lighting ducked. “Ladies and gentlemen, introducing international recording artists: *Foreigner!*”

We stopped chewing and stared. There were gasps. *Foreigner?* *The Band?* Like blaring-from-your-Iroc-Z-in-1985 *Foreigner*?

The first few chords of “Feels Like the First Time” began blaring. Pandemonium ensued. Men and women in suits and dresses they only pretended to afford rushed the stage, throwing elbows, hurdling chairs, hip-checking tables. A wave of repressed rock zealots surged toward the band like a mullet tsunami. And riding this wave’s crest was myself, until my elbows were planted into the stage’s edge.

A man in a tuxedo jumped onto the platform and then dove back into the crowd.

A woman in stiletto heals tried to hug Lou Gramm and was tackled by security.

Panties struck the saxophone player’s face during his fingerless-glove solo.

The band’s demeanor transformed from an initial sullenness, which they apparently felt for being a post-glory rock act reduced to closing out a corporate gig, to wide-eyed elation as they realized multiple arrests were taking place before they’d even gotten to “Dirty White Boy.”

And there I was, my sternum bruising on the stage’s rim, vaguely familiar with a few of the songs’ melodies, caught up in the energy and smiling like an idiot while executives crowd-surfed behind me.

And then a strange thing occurred to me.

I don’t like this music.

I don’t like *Foreigner* at all.

I can’t even stand the genre.

The epiphanies compounded; I didn’t give two shits about selling sweepers at a higher volume than I had to that point. And I certainly didn’t care about becoming anyone’s definition of rich. How I had *Talking Heads* lyrics in mind while four feet from *Foreigner*’s speaker array is a mystery, but there they were all the same:

*And you may find yourself
Behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house
With a beautiful wife
And you may ask yourself, well
How did I get here?
...MY GOD! WHAT HAVE I DONE?*¹

Cheering for a band I did not like at a conference I did not enjoy about a product I didn’t care for as part of a career I didn’t want. These were not my dreams. Who the hell drew this map?

It would be years before I quit that company because it was all too easy to slide back into what my organization and my trajectory wanted for me. Income and awards, and lavish vacations indefinitely delayed until such time as there was more² income and awards. Leo DiCaprio warned us that waking up from others’ dreams is tricky. It’s hard to quit when the thing you are quitting is believed to be your very identity.

René Girard spent his life teaching us that our desires are mimetic. That is, we are unknowingly *assigned* our desires, wanting not so much an object, but miming the wanting of others. Like a child who must have the toy his classmate has set his sights on, not simply because of the intrinsic value of the toy, but because his classmate has made it clear just what a kid’s wanting should look like. “Humankind is that creature who lost a part of its animal instinct in order to gain access to ‘desire,’ as it is called. Once their natural needs are satisfied, humans desire intensely, but they don’t know exactly what they desire, for no instinct guides them. We do not each have our own desire, one that is really our own. The essence of desire is to have no essential goal. Truly to desire, we must have recourse to people about us; we have to borrow their desires.”³



From earliest childhood we hunger not simply for that which we don't have, but for being like others. As Girard clarifies, "all desire is a desire to be."⁴ It's a scary, difficult thing to reassess your dreams. To reorient their locus. These questions can dismantle your very name and separate you from those whose dreams create and validate your own. Yet there's a kind of liberation in understanding that not fulfilling your destiny is not so much an issue of not trying, maybe, but one of having misplaced your birthright. What if what you've come to assume is laziness or procrastination is actually your heart waiting for you to chase something you're truly attracted to? Something you're made for. Unnerving as these questions are, when we wake up to find a blaring radio was the shape of our night's dreams, we turn it off and start our own day.

If we can experience liberation—in any measure—from others' desires masquerading as our own, perhaps we can be freed from others' worries and strictures as well. Perhaps we can find we've been recruited into others' anxieties, prejudices, and narrowness without ever having genuinely asked ourselves why. Perhaps we can wake up and be what we are, if only incrementally so, while simultaneously allowing others to be what *they* are. Because chances are we've been assigned as many

of our dreams as we have our enemies. The two are connected after all; are there any worse villains than those who might get to what you want *before you do*? What if you don't hate who you think you do. What if instead you only hate who you think you are supposed to? And if you're only supposed to, perhaps you can instead do what *you* want, and love them. It's worth reconsidering.

Our culture seems newly jarred by folks daring to question the maps. How dare I put words like meaning, rights, success, career, identity, belief, art, life, etc., back on the table for evaluation? How dare I question our anthems and reject the family business and be content to dance and paint and live unrecorded lives? Indeed, people are questioning everything they've been told to dream. But if I won't face that my desires have been obscured so systematically by the dreams and desires of others, if I won't divest myself of these oversized suits of armor given for fights not my own, then how else can I embrace another? How can I love and serve those I'm trying to beat to an pre-assigned finish line? How can I speak about my path, my journey, my life, with any integrity, if I won't allow another lyric to creep in and remind me that I'm not necessarily what I've been trained and incentivized to pretend? And if I'll dare to sing *that song*, underneath the noise preassigned to me, then I'm free.

1 *Once in a Lifetime*, Talking Heads

2 Perhaps the most troublesome abstraction we live by.

3 René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*.

4 *When These Things Begin: Conversations with Michel Treguer* by René Girard



PATTI SMITH DREAMS IN BLACK AND WHITE

By Cathleen Falsani

The last thing I packed in my aged Subaru before driving from Southern California to Phoenix, Arizona, on the morning of November 9, 2016 was my Polaroid 210 Land Camera. I carried it in its original, inelegant gray case with the too-short brown plastic strap.

The 1967 camera, which I bought last year on eBay for \$13, is one of my prized possessions. It reminds me of Patti Smith, the punk poet-iconoclast, who has made ethereal, often haunting images with a similar model for much of her life.

And Patti Smith reminds me to be brave, curious, true, and present; to pay attention, linger, and not give a shit about anyone else's expectations, fears, or projections about who, how, or what I should be. She reminds me to wander and dream the way we used to when we were children when dreams were everything, in and of themselves, and not a means to an end, or an ersatz roadmap for the future.

Film for the Land Camera is both hard to find and expensive. New packs of color film run about \$2 per shot. Black-and-white, which I prefer, can be three times as much and as precious. Both film and camera are temperamental, imprecise, and terribly susceptible to human error (if such a judgment can be applied to the creative process or, say, magic).

Twenty-five years ago in college, when my photography professor said there are no "mistakes" when you take a picture, I believed him.. Occasionally he'd give us an assignment to shoot something without looking through the viewfinder of our camera. Our eyes see one thing but our subconscious mind (and vision) see something else and sometimes, perhaps even more often than not, the so-called mistakes are more interesting than the images we'd intended or planned to capture.

No matter which apparatus I'm shooting with, I love photography. Always have. I recently found what is, probably, the first photo I ever took—an

afternoon. Gone are the days when I had to be much more precise about what, when, and how I shot on physical film for fear of running out of frames. Now tens of thousands of my photographs exist in a cloud somewhere, not even occupying digital space on my camera or phone.

That's what makes shooting with my Land Camera special. I have ten shots. And that's if all of them develop properly. From time to time I purchase old, expired, unopened packs of Fujifilm 3000-b from eBay for maybe \$1 or 50¢ a shot. Sometimes the film still works, sometimes not. But I don't know until I've clicked the shutter, pulled the film from the camera, and waited twenty-five



image of my father at a zoo in 1974, captured with his Brownie camera when I was three years-old. I studied photography a bit in college, but never thought of pursuing it as a career, meaning a path, a trajectory that led to a specific goal. It was more of a dream or amateur's passion—a footnote to the main story of my life. Or so I believed for far too long.

Since smartphones made digital cameras ubiquitous a decade ago, I've made pictures every day—sometimes thousands of images in an

seconds, forty-five seconds, maybe more if it's cold; carefully peeled the photo away from the paper film that makes the developer adhere to it, and expose the wet image to the light and air. It's the same thrill of mystery and anticipation I would get as a child when my dad would let me buy a "grab bag" for a quarter at the country store in his home town in rural New Hampshire. I never knew what would be inside. I just knew there would be something marvelous, even if I didn't like everything I got.

Making photos with my half-century-old Patti Smith machine is a crap shoot. Every time. You can't *really* focus a 1967 Land Camera. At least not with any modicum of precision. Even figuring out what will wind up framed within the white borders of the "instant" photo is largely impossible until it's a *fait accompli*. All of this makes the clunky, gray plastic camera with its black bellows and creaking viewfinder a delicious adventure every time I take it out and try to make pictures.

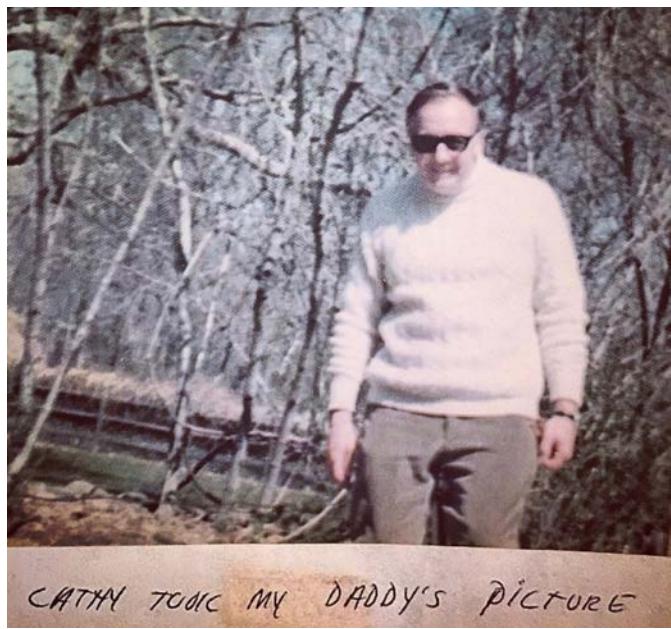
As I was packing for the last-minute trip to Phoenix to help get out the vote in a contested area on election day, I saw the camera sitting on a bookshelf in my bedroom. It'd been a while since I shot with it. *Could be a historic night*, I thought. *Perfect time to take her for a spin*. I had one pack of black-and-white film that had expired when Barack Obama was still a U.S. senator. I loaded the film, dusted off the lens, put the camera back in its case with a chamois, and carried it to the car with a large Thermos full of coffee before hitting the road at 6 a.m. for the six-hour drive southeast.

I left the camera in the car while I helped canvass an enclave in the Encanto Village neighborhood of Phoenix. But I brought it with me to the "Democratic Victory Party" at the Renaissance Hotel downtown after the polls closed. The second-floor ballroom was packed with loads of interesting-looking people clutching overpriced beer and wine. Television, radio, and print journalists lined the walls and wandered the room, stopping a few interesting-looking people here and there for brief interviews. I used to be one of them—a journalist, that is—and some days I suppose I still am, even though newspapers have withered away, taking jobs and careers with them. I've covered many election nights and old habits die hard.

After making several laps of the room, I pulled the Land Camera from its case, expanded the bellows, wiped the lens again, and fielded a few questions about what it was, how old it is, and whether it still works. I'd noticed a couple

of teenage boys by the ballroom doors. Native American brothers, I presumed, from their features, as well as the long raven hair and turquoise bolo tie wore by the older of the two. They were great looking, and I thought they'd make a beautiful picture if they were game to have their portrait taken.

Turns out there were three brothers. They'd come with their mother, a Hillary Clinton



CATHY TOOK MY DADDY'S PICTURE

supporter. And they were Navajo. I took five shots. Three developed. Two were clear enough to see their faces. None of the shots included all four members of the family and I never did get a clear image of the middle brother—the one with the long hair and the bolo tie—even though he's the one I thought would be most photogenic.

I told them I'd catch up with them later in the evening, after the election results were in, to see how they felt about the first woman president. We shook hands and smiled and went our separate ways.

I never saw them again.

Hillary lost. And I drove back to California the next morning with five shots left on the pack of film in my camera, saving them for a moment when the light is better.



Lost and Found. MIKE RIDDELL

"It was a difficult week. It started with the U.S. election. Then Leonard Cohen went and died on us. Finally I visited a dear friend who is dying of cancer.

There's a broken shard of a lyric from Joni Mitchell that is uncomfortably lodged somewhere in my intestines:

Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got till it's gone

The sharp edges of it irritate my soft tissue, causing me pain of a sort that's not quickly silenced.

And these days I'm feeling it all the more. A sense of loss; a feeling that something sacred is draining from our community. On my better days, I convince myself that it's not lost at all, just hidden. Sometimes precious things get covered over, and can be revealed by taking the time to find and restore them.

I'm not even entirely sure how to name what I'm grieving. It might be

decency, respect, kindness, or tolerance. But I suspect it's properly called justice. During my days of childhood innocence, the idea didn't exist — apart from a selfish desire to make sure I got my fair share of what was available.

At the age of five, it expressed itself as outrage when my handmade trolley was confiscated by teachers. When I was twenty, it seemed somehow unfair that I found myself serving time in a Moroccan prison on drug charges. By the time I'd made thirty-five, I was beginning to experience compassion — feeling the pain of others who suffered through no fault of their own.

It took a long time for an anger at injustice to rise in my soul, despite the fact that I'd been an activist for many years before. Anger is a raw force with many faces — it is more often destructive than constructive. I imagine I was in my mid-forties before I started to understand that the best part of my anger was generated by a sense of loss.

In general terms, I think it evolved into an approximation of what Walter Brueggemann calls “the prophetic imagination.” By this I understand him to mean that you can measure the present against a vision of what the future might hold — what indeed humanity is capable of and is called toward. This creates a hugely generative gap, a chasm of despair and longing.

The dream of something better was a long time coming, but once it lodged in my heart it was inescapable. It became the catalyst for dreaming of something more. I dreamed of something deeper and richer, not for myself, but for all of us bound together by our humanity. The sneaking suspicion grew: *We are better than all this.*

I discovered the positive face of grief. There is pain in comparing what is against what might have been. That hurt can either drive us into our shells, or motivate us to enlarge our horizons. To be personal for a moment — and we are sharing this conversation on a porch after all — the rape of a close family member brought me to dissolution.

Certainly there was something precious lost in that, something unfixable. I faced a choice between bitterness and acceptance. In the words of Robert Frost, “I took the road less travelled by.” By breathing my way through the moments, I discovered I could survive.

Those around me could survive, though it was survival at a cost.

I also learned that brokenness may engender acceptance rather than a quest for revenge. When visiting my family, my temptation to rage about this injustice dissolved in an unexpectedly gentle sorrow, which encompassed all of us, including the perpetrator of the rape. Believe me when I tell you this was no wishy-washy dismissal of the tragedy, but rather an owning of it.

Sometimes it takes great loss to awaken great desire. I find myself now hungering after the goodness in people; prospecting for kindness. The environment of the West poisons us all. We are the product of a social and economic experiment called monetarism — one that easily turns us into competitive rats, biting each other for the sake of winning some reward.

This week I've been to see the darkly beautiful Ken Loach film *I, Daniel Blake*. It has reminded me what has been lost in recent decades. Mostly it seems to be the simple human compassion that comes from pausing long enough to understand ourselves, and to recognize the wonder of others. If we have anger, let us turn it against the structures that diminish our potential to find community.

It may be that the grand dream of justice is as simple as having respect for the

wonder of existence. When we discover ourselves, when we honor our environment, when we treasure the wonderful variety of people and creatures who accompany us on our journey, then it is as natural as breathing to work together for good.

The sense of loss, of being misheard and neglected, of being shut out — that grief may awaken us to a resolute hope, should we choose to allow it to. I suspect a little unplugging is vital to such a transformation. We need to disconnect from the false dreams of fame, wealth, dominance, and prestige, before we become capable of recognizing the larger dream of justice.

A porch is a good place to sit and swap a few stories as we ponder a way forward. We have as much time as we need to be human, and sharing songs and laughter is as good a means to uncovering what's lost as any number of lectures or appointments. When an archaeologist discovers a precious relic, she takes time to brush away the soil so that it might be recovered intact.

These days I find myself to be something of a trash collector — looking for that which is broken or discarded, and trying to see what it was part of and if it might be restored. A lot that is precious can be casually forgotten, and only later recognized as vital to an honest life.

V.

The years passed on in swiftness
fleet,
The road became a village street;

And this, before men were aware,
A city's crowded thoroughfare.

And soon the central street was
this
Of a renowned metropolis;

And men two centuries and a
half,
Trod in the footsteps of that calf.

Calling All Artists, and All of us Artists

MICHELLE LEBARON

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

—WB Yeats

*It's here they got the range
And the machinery for change
And it's here they got the spiritual thirst.
—Leonard Cohen*

Something mythic is happening in the world. We are in the midst of an archetypal *changing of the gods* moment, when apparent “givens” dissolve. Changing of the gods moments happen rarely, but when they do, shifts can be rapid. These are moments when the heroes and the heroines change along with the guiding stars and the constellations of key ideas guiding a society or a people. In such times, we may find ourselves off-center, our unrealized dreams tugging at our sleeves with forlorn longing or frantic urgency. Momentum that we thought was reliable begins to flag. At such times, it is vitally important that the center hold, that the poetry of possibility not yield to the fixed hold of fear.

In times when the very music of being changes, there is openness and possibility. We literally look again at fundamental questions: who we are, where we come from (a question that is always answered in the present, through current lenses) and where we are going (also a question answered in the present, for the future is always beyond our grasp).

Which gods will we choose? Will we fasten our hopes onto a god of generosity, a being spacious, welcoming, and loving? Or will we choose retrenchment, looking backwards to gods of old, vengeful, partisan, and anger-filled? Listening to the rhetoric in the post-election United States, this stark choice has been posed again and again.



How Loki Wrought Mischief in Asgard, Willy Pogany, 1920 Public Domain

But what if the way the choices themselves are framed is part of the problem? As I have addressed lawyers, judges, psychotherapists, dialogue practitioners, and mediators in conferences and community gatherings over the past three decades, conversation often turned to bemoaning the increasing myopia of the political right. The unacknowledged subtext was clear: we have clearer sight. “Our” people hold the best values. Sometimes, I asked audiences how many people from the other side of the political spectrum they engage in daily life. Often, the question was met with silence. At these times, I wanted to channel the trickster, to pose practical questions about the logical consequences of their stance from a bird’s eye view. But instead I followed the rules, walking away from the podium discouraged.

Consider the trickster figure in mythologies of many world cultures. Trickster bridges heaven and earth, practical yet aware of the larger reality. Symbolizing the playful and disruptive side of human imagination, trickster is more at home in the shadows, on the borders and in the in-between places neither light nor dark. Trickster has huge appetites that lead to slipping between the rules, even lying or stealing. Yet trickster is an indispensable hero, ingenious inventor, and brilliant problem-solver. Trickster does not accept limitations, but finds ways around them. Thus, the

trickster figure Coyote taught native peoples in North America how to catch salmon, sing and shoot arrows, and the trickster Hermes taught people to make fire.

One particularly endearing attribute of trickster is his irreverence. He does not take himself too seriously. She does not spend time gazing in the mirror at her flawless countenance. For she and he are flawed as we all are, and it is through those cracks – to invoke the irreplaceable Leonard Cohen – that the light gets in. Lewis Hyde’s wonderful exploration of tricksters across cultures helps us see that “[t]he old myths say that the trickster made the world as we actually find it. Other gods set out to create a world more perfect and ideal, but this world—with its complexity and ambiguity, its beauty and its dirt—was trickster’s creation, and the work is not yet finished.”

Given our unfinished state, what is needed now is not a vengeful God who will come down and strike misguided voters or politicos with lightning. Nor simply the more perfect God in her crystalline aspects of abundance, generosity, and caring. Perhaps the polarization in the post-election U.S. and post-Brexit UK is opening a new channel for the light to come in, a light that more consciously includes shadow. For if shadow is excluded, it takes on even more potent form.

The most virulent, hate-infused conflicts I have encountered as a mediator over the past thirty years have been in religious congregations, not secular settings. In religious groups, shadow is often denied as people come together with an eye fixed on virtue. Yet shadow exists. Wherever we humans live, there is hubris, greed, jealousy, unkindness, even hatred. And when those shadow qualities are denied or unintegrated, they become more barbed and potently dangerous.

This is not to argue for a relativist world where uncivil, hateful discourses are loosed without filters or protest. A lot of what was said during the interminable U.S. election campaign constituted – in my book – deplorable hate speech. It is to observe that the chasm between those who either have or believe they have agency, voice, and economic mobility and those who don't, or believe they don't. In the U.S., Britain and elsewhere the chasm seems to be growing, and this is an urgent problem. The two votes underlined what happens when large groups feel disenfranchised and unheard. In the media fog that paints events red or blue, truth is a casualty. Not truth in a pure sense, but the truth of the messy, paradoxical, complicated world in which socioeconomic class has become an increasingly stark divider, race remains an unsalved trauma, and the clarion of sacrifice is used to bind those who were dealt the worst hand. The hubris of progressives made us blind to this, stoking the fires of the over-confident commentators who predicted sure victories for Clinton or the U.K. Campaign to remain in the European Union.

The loud voices of pollsters, analysts, and pundits in the lead-up to both votes were subdued in the face of their undeniable errors. Their errors were due, in part, to their blindness to the mythic, and to the embodied, sensed and lived realities of large numbers of people.

Why is it important to be aware of the mythic dimension of our lives? Because myths, though they are sometimes mischaracterized as untrue stories, are actually part of the “glue” that holds humans together. Karen Armstrong writes that myths are “universal and timeless stories”...that

remind us in narrative form what it means to be human. They give us meaning and provide a grammar of being that guides us, often outside conscious awareness.

If this is a changing of the gods moment when the core myths that guide us are up for re-examination, let us turn to Karen Armstrong's understanding of myth as an art form that helps us inscribe meaning on our world, inoculating against despair arising in relation to its (and our) imperfections. We urgently need the leadership of artists to help us see clearly through this period of tightening and narrowing. We need artists' familiarity with paradox, irony, complexity; with both the limitations and sublime creativity of the physical body. We need trickster art that transgresses, posing questions otherwise unheard and unsettling our ideas of how the world works.

It is not scholarly cleverness that is needed now, but the courage to question “common sense”; to uncover ways to engage each other across the chasms that gape starkly in our midst. We need to make new myths about who we are, and invent processes to share them. Artists have always done this, across societies and empires.

Examples of artists' pivotal contributions are many, as artists are often activists on the vanguard of social change. Members of Yuyachkani in Peru (whose name, in Quechuan, means “I am thinking / I am remembering”) courageously performed work about the civil war in Quechuan communities before members gave testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there. Dijana Milošević, director of DAH Theatre in Belgrade, relates how multiple works were created during and after the Yugoslav war based on the belief that “we cannot move forward until we face what happened in our name.” The tradition of artists transgressing borders and challenging prevailing politics extends from Ai WeiWei’s quest for openness in China through David Alfaro Siqueiros’ Mexico City murals nearly a century earlier that inspired a generation of Mexican workers to mobilize, and far beyond them back through history.

In the unsettling process of birthing a greater consciousness, old identities, forms and myths are dying, even as those to guide us forward have not been fully developed. Our work, with which artists are intimately familiar, is to do two things: stay connected to our centers without grasping for old identities or complacent self-righteousness, and to continually engage a broad spectrum of others, especially those with whom we disagree. The way forward is to have the most audacious, ambitious, and inclusive dialogues we can imagine in multiple forums to explore who we as humans can be now.

To do so, we need theatre, dance, music, and visual art that provokes and challenges us. In the past ten years, I have worked with a wide range of artists who know ways to bring shadow and light—within us and in communities—into dialogue. The Canadian dancer Margie Gillis encouraged a gathering of experts on religious conflicts to set aside our ideas about religion and our theories about how to engage religious differences, focusing instead on the health of our organisms, collective and personal. She showed us ways to train ourselves through physical movement and interaction, learning how to move the boundaries within and between us. For example, we worked in pairs to explore what movement a subtle tap or light brushing gesture might inspire in our partner. Doing this made us much more aware of our effects—moment by moment—on others. We also used movement to work with strong emotions arising in interaction, learning how fear can calm as we engage with a stance that initially scared us in another. As we did this work, we discovered more openness, curiosity, and confidence in our safety – physical and psychological – when we ventured out of our comfort zones.

Can we preserve our health, individually and collectively, by dancing together? By creating theatre together in the tradition of Augusto Boal? By resisting easy characterizations of right and wrong, progressive and regressive, instead creating murals that depict the collisions and uncertainties that accompany and confound our attempts to build resilient communities? In Margie's words, "Can we dance with the monsters (our own and others') until they get tired?" In the space that arises when the monsters are tired, can we find

sanctuary from which something new and more healthy can be born?

Artists and theologians have always walked this terrain. Macbeth provocatively proposed that "life is nothing more than a 'tale told by an idiot,' a purposeless emergence of life-forms including the clever, greedy, selfish, and unfortunate species that we call homo sapiens." Counterpoint this with the words of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin who wrote "There is something afoot in the universe, something that looks like gestation and birth." I choose the latter vision as my center, yet I know I must include Macbeth in midwifing it into form.

This is not only a decision born of conviction; it is a choice born of my pain when I've realized how aspects of my shadow have kept me from the wholeness I desire. Arts practices have helped me see how, at times, cleverness has kept me insulated from intimacy and selfishness has masqueraded as healthy self-regard. This is why my work is now solely devoted to integrating the arts in conflict engagement: they are the most nuanced mirror I know. Without them, I am not sure how we can truly do the work of holding both our individual and collective centers.

¹ W. B. Yeats. *The Second Coming*

² Leonard Cohen *Democracy*

³ <http://www.lewishyde.com/publications/trickster>

⁴ DAH Theatre, a Sourcebook. Dennis Barnett, ed. MD: Lexington Books, 2016.

⁵ Jane Goodall, *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey*. New York: Warner Books, 1999: xi-xii



BETTERisComing

A Conversation with Melvin Bray

Melvin Bray approaches finding more just ways of being in the world with passion and courage in his new book BETTER: Waking Up to Who We Could Be (Chalice Press, 2017). The Porch asked him a few questions about the upcoming release.

The Porch: What do you want us to know about the world as you see it?

Melvin Bray: Folks are learning the exact wrong lessons from the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Conservative social, political, and economic abuses are only made possible through liberal enabling. White liberalism as a construct seems to have baked into it a kind of philosophical hand-wringing, apology for wrongdoing, and lack of agency that never demands an end to oppression. I'm not primarily concerned with what people think, feel, or believe. If thinking better helps people do better, then by all means, as they say, come let us reason together. However, what abusers and enablers DO is my priority. No abuser should be allowed to continue in their abuse until they agree that what they are doing is abuse. If they are unwilling or unable to stop of their own accord, then they must be stopped. Once they stop, then and only then do they deserve dialogue. And they are welcome to hold onto their views as long as it suits them. However, we must put in place mechanisms (safeguards) that dramatically limit their ability to enact their views to the detriment of others. Otherwise, they will always come back. The empire always strikes back!

To some degree, MLK and his compatriots shamed underground the open hostility—what Carol Anderson describes as "white rage"—directed at people of color, and by extension, they called into question much of that which was directed toward other historically marginalized persons. But that hostility (not fear, hostility) didn't go anywhere. Almost immediately, it started working to create the conditions to strike back and the philosophical underpinnings to justify it (which even some historically marginalized people have bought into). And political and religious liberals have spent the last fifty years apologizing for them, anguish over how they must feel, negotiating a nonexistent middle ground between oppression and non-oppression, allowing their maneuvering to keep open the option of complete regression, complete repression, at any moment. Then some liberals want to be shocked and appalled when conservatives finally exploit that option. That's what they've been setting up to do all this time! We never made them STOP; liberals wanted to dialogue first (or as they say, "start a conversation"), all the while remaining more and more comfortable themselves with inequity.

I'm looking for folks to join me in an actual progressive—yea, even prophetic—way of being in the world. It is never an act of oppression to enforce equity!

What's most alive in you right now?

As you see, the election is a large part of what's alive for me—#NotMyFaith #NotMyGod #NotMyPresident #BETTERisComing! It means so much to me, in part, because I work with justice organizations trying to figure out how to resist the injustice that is—in the name of God in many cases—building up to roll down on us like a mighty stream. I'm even more concerned because of the open hostility it directs toward my children. Like Trayvon Martin and countless others, my children (and their Muslim, immigrant, indigenous, and queer friends) cannot outrun others' willful misperceptions and mistreatment of them. At some point they will stand up to their abusers, and that story has seldom, if ever, ended well for those being abused in our country.

What's the BETTER story?

If what you are asking, "What's the story behind BETTER?" I can answer that. I'm a dad, a former literature teacher, and a lifelong lover of good story who knows first hand its power to create possibility and shape reality. As my children grew, I wondered if there was a way to share the stories of faith and possibility with them that have been so meaningful in my own life, without saddling them with all the baggage—particularly the hostile ways of being in the world—that their mom and I have worked so hard to lay down. BETTER is the culmination of what I've learned from that journey over the years.

What's not working about the story we're telling?

The most prominent personal, communal, and national stories tend to be some iteration of "We're gonna be on top," a supremacist logic that enshrines inequity. It's an innately hostile posture that carries bigotry, strife, and violence in its wake.

"We've got to be on top!" is so deeply embedded in the western psyche, particularly that of the dominant culture, that it experiences any

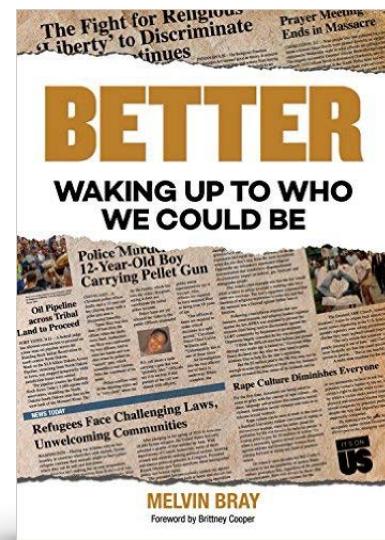
opposition, any impediment, any small attempt at equity as oppression. Thus, during the election, many literally celebrated the public denigration of female competence. Meanwhile, the story was told of "white men who felt overlooked," rather than

broadening the electorate through voter registration and mobilization and be left to have to share power, all against the backdrop of a soothing double-dealing lullaby that 'we've always been stronger together.' Most didn't even acknowledge the voter suppression and intimidation enacted at every available turn, as long as the fallacious mantra remained of "protecting the integrity of the ballot box from voter fraud." And the vast majority quietly came to accept

xenophobia, blatant hostility, and outright violence toward historically marginalized persons as tolerable public discourse, in light of media tales of the "legitimate fears of forgotten white voters." All of these are variations on the same supremacist logic that has to be rewritten.

If the best criticism of the bad is the practice of the good, what is your prescription for change?

I've been working on a manifesto for what I'm calling The BETTER Movement. What I've got so far is: Be BETTER! Do more than try to feel better. Think and do better. Actually be the better you want to see in the world; don't just want or wish or hope or dream. Disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression, especially if they privilege you. Inequity isn't a look. We can be better than that!



Feel free to deconstruct and reconstruct anything that falls short of the better you imagine possible. You get no extra points for being right about everything the first time. If you come up short, compost it! Plow it under and grow something better. And remember that we pass the aspiration for better along through our stories. So tell more beautiful, more just, more virtue-filled stories today. It's simple: better stories, better world.

It still needs work, but you get the point!

BETTER seeks to answer the question: What if the world as it persists—with its racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, ecological disregard and so on—is exactly the world we storied into existence with the hostile faith stories we tell? The good news is that, if we storied our way into this mess, then we should be able to story our way out of it.

What are practical steps for us to move forward?

In addition to being chock full of great stories and better intuitions for showing up in the world, BETTER

overflows with practical tools for how both to recognize and to tell better stories of faith and possibility.

Bringing the conversation full circle, if people of moral courage were truly telling more beautiful, more just, more virtue-filled stories, then islamophobia, misogyny, anti-immigration and anti-blackness would not have been able to be elected by a clear minority of the American people. The vast majority of Americans would have been so excited by the splendor of possible, they would have flocked in droves to the polls on behalf of that vision, as just one small but necessary act in building an equitable world. Communities of goodwill, like those I work with, would be overrun with folks trying to seek the good of others. And our children and friends would have a reason to care about this thing called faith that matters so much to so many of us. You can't say for with certainty I'm wrong because we've never tried it. So, for now, that's my story, and I'm sticking to it.





daring to dream

Peterson Toscano

These are days in which nightmares come easier than dreams. Many people are struggling to embrace and pursue their best dreams when thinking of the future. In fact, with the current political uncertainty, for some of us, the dreams that we dare to dream may seem as if they have been put on hold. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to envision a dysfunctional and dystopian future. That's easy, particularly when it comes to issues like climate change and social justice. The real challenge is to imagine success.

If we consider what the people of the future might have to say about us, we can immediately conjure up a futuristic host in rags on a burning planet wagging their fingers at us in condemnation.

But can we imagine another outcome? Can we get past all of the cynicism, anger, fears, and doubt we have towards our governments and fellow citizens to dream of a different future? And if we do, is it possible that the act of dreaming will not only give us hope but also help move us to action?

For the past four years I have been deep in the world of climate change—a dire, soupy mess of fear, blame, shame, future dystopian catastrophizing, oh, and desperate-eyed polar bears. I am optimistic by nature and have recoiled at the steady stream of gloom and doom. I'm learning to force my brain to think differently in order to actively consider success in addressing the wonky issues of carbon pollution and its effects on

the planet and earthlings. To do so requires drawing on my imagination. I must dare to dream.

So I created a character, a historian researching and teaching in the year 2166, 150 years from now. His name is Dr. Timothy Meadows. Instead of giving him a laundry list of all of the failures, abuses, and really stupid steps his dysfunctional and ineffectual ancestors took, I provide him a vibrant past of climate action, with ancestors who took on the crisis with gusto and enacted real and lasting solutions. Dr. Timothy's job then is to highlight the stunning accomplishments of the climate generation—you and me today—and to celebrate our successes. I have written fifty monologues for this climate historian (you can hear many of them on my Climate Stew podcast).

Our brains expect business as usual until we tell them otherwise. The climate crisis, and the opportunity for humans to flourish and take reparative action together, requires us to rewire our brains. They are already overburdened with the fog of propaganda and the noise of an over-connected world. Rewiring might be just what they need...

So, let's imagine we are in a lecture hall a century and a half from now, on the annual day that commemorates the climate generation, when the eminent climate historian, Dr. Timothy Meadows, comes to the podium:

Good evening. As a climate historian I look back in time to consider the amazing people of the climate generation, our great-great grandparents. I have dug into history as early as the 2010's up through the 2030's and focused my attention on people, institutions, and movements that contributed to the peace and stability we enjoy today in the 22nd Century.

What have I learned about our ancestors and their responses to global warming?

Initially they were relatively slow to act. In part, the emotional shock paralyzed many people into what became known as CDS, Climate Dismissal Syndrome.

But as we have often seen throughout history, once humans understand the threats they face, they respond robustly leading to bold action, inspired innovation, personal and collective sacrifices, and stronger communities. That is exactly what our ancestors did.

To understand this, we first need to put into focus the problems they faced. We must remember, the rapid changes to weather endangered every aspect of their lives. It affected our ancestor's food production, water security, and coastal cities. It magnified existing political conflicts leading to mass migrations, war, and suffering. And it touched everything including simple pleasures like a day in the park, playing in the snow, or enjoying a cup of coffee.

The problems loomed so large they nearly crushed our ancestors, but they discovered inner resources, and together they stood up to myriad challenges. In short, they agreed to be responsible and clean up after themselves. This took on many forms including systemic changes to how they got their energy moving away from pollutants toward healthy energy sources. The Great Transition came about through citizens who pressured leaders to change energy policy. The public collectively demanded that polluters must pay a steep fee if they polluted the skies and oceans. This gave investors the incentive to fund renewables resulting in a rapid shift away from dirty sources of energy to healthy, clean sources. No longer locked into dirty fuel sources, they saw an immediate decrease in respiratory diseases

including a dramatic improvement in health for urban dwellers, particularly people of color who had experienced disproportionately high levels of air pollution in their neighborhoods. The Great Transition resulted in a period of innovation and challenges. People had to live new lives on a new planet. They worked together to look after each other during the Great Transition and during the many extreme weather events that grew in frequency and intensity. Places of worship opened their doors to provide short-term sanctuary during extreme heat waves and long-term sanctuary to climate migrants.

Neighborhoods formed Friendly Collectives where they worked together to grow food, conserve water, and look after each other during extreme weather events. Engineers and architects used their skills to adapt to the changing planet, protecting people and land while also creating spaces that fostered community.

Not only did our ancestors take on the risks that came with global warming, they relentlessly sought to make the world a better place for everyone, not just for some but with sensitivity to the ways people who had lived on the margins were more negatively impacted by climate change, including LGBTQ seniors and youth and people without homes. They also improved policing practices at a time when more and more places regularly declared states of emergency where everyday rules did not always apply.

We can name groups and many individual players. But so many of the efforts were done quietly, out of view, by people who often felt inadequate and overwhelmed. How can we catalog the relentless willingness to find hope and pursue solutions? How can we say thank you to the many unsung heroes of the climate generation who faced an uncertain future and refused to be defeated? Perhaps the greatest way of showing our gratitude is to live our lives in full knowledge that the stability and peace we have in the world today is due to their many efforts long ago.

On this day in the year 2166, we remember those climate action heroes and all they did to safeguard civilization and all we hold dear.

VI.

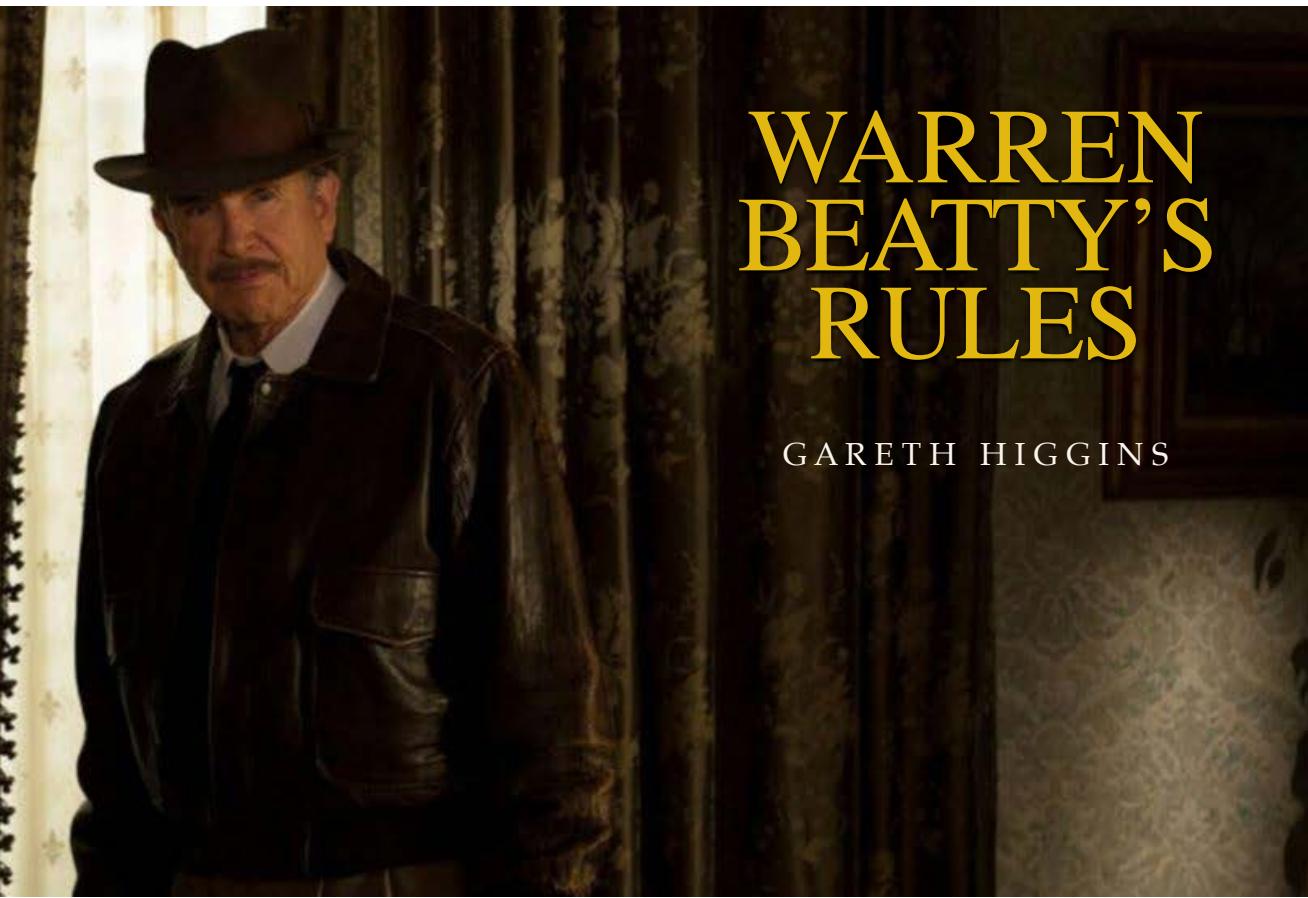
Each day a hundred thousand
rout
Followed the zigzag calf about

And o'er his crooked journey
went
The traffic of a continent.

A Hundred thousand men were
led,
By one calf near three centuries
dead.

They followed still his crooked
way,
And lost one hundred years a
day;

For thus such reverence is lent,
To well established precedent.



WARREN BEATTY'S RULES

GARETH HIGGINS

Warren Beatty is one of those actors who truly deserves to be called a filmmaker. Having produced many of his films, the five that he has also directed (four of which he wrote or co-wrote) are unique confections that reimagine their own genres. Beatty has a genius for making substance entertaining, or entertainment substantial; he's been in the public eye for nearly sixty years, and his social conscience has always infused the work.

He has gone from friendship with Robert Kennedy and participation in the civil rights movement to confronting the urge to nihilism that seemed to bubble up for some when the 60s failed to produce their hoped-for utopia (*Bonnie and Clyde*); to opening audience's minds to the rise of socialism in the US, imagining what it might be like to build a society in which people actually cared for each other (*Reds*); to satirizing the suicidal damage of a political system funded by special interests in one of the most truthful mainstream Hollywood movies ever made (*Bulworth*).

Then he disappeared from the screen for almost two decades.

He hasn't written or directed since 1998, declaring the joys of parenting superior to making movies, with the lovely phrase, "Each one of my kids is more interesting to me than any five movies." For a time some of us wondered if he would ever make another movie; when news began to emerge that his long-gestating Howard Hughes project was underway, with the title *Rules Don't Apply*, some of us were quietly delighted, and quietly nervous. You never know when the muse will disperse, and we all knew that an eighteen year gap could point one way or another.

We remembered what we loved about his films—the edge-of-the-world moroseness of *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; the glamor and cruelty of *Bugsy*, equally tempting and repellent (and a film in which Elliott Gould proves that sometimes supporting roles can steal scenes if not entire movies); the self-effacement of the absurdly underrated, extraordinarily funny-smart *Ishtar*. Then there are the films he (co)wrote or directed: *Heaven Can Wait*, *Reds*, *Dick Tracy*, and *Bulworth*.

In these films, Beatty reinvents four familiar genres: a screwball comedy, a romantic social epic, a comic book adventure, and a political satire..

Heaven Can Wait exchanges predictable alpha masculinity for subtle expressions of the universal need for companionship. *Dick Tracy* may be the most exquisitely designed comic book movie ever made, not to mention a semi-musical with Stephen Sondheim songs to boot. *Bulworth* is a wildly entertaining political satire (a tough-minded, big-hearted Hollywood comedy with a Greek chorus played by the political activist poet Amiri Baraka) that in a parallel universe might have been co-written by Howard Zinn and Michelle Alexander. Meanwhile, *Reds* is an out-and-out masterpiece—a romantic epic about the rise of communism in the U.S., with a convincing central love affair and dramatization of what building a social movement is actually like. What Warren Beatty does is rare: big canvas storytelling in which the central male figure is never perfect, always vulnerable, never saves the day by himself (if at all), but always in partnership with a strong woman, sometimes a strong community. There's a nice symmetry in the fact that he seems to create community on his sets. The same names pop up in his supporting casts more than once: Paul Sorvino, Oliver Platt, the delightfully grumpy and much-missed character actor, Jack Warden.

In some respects, he's the philosophical opposite of the star whose creative endeavors his most resembles: Clint Eastwood has produced and directed and acted in his own movies, too, but his archetype always goes it alone. Beatty's protagonists are actually just *lonely*. They are desperate to connect or be understood, whether they know it or not. Allowing us to connect with our own insecurities and uncertainties and feel okay about them is one of the chief gifts of his work. Warren Beatty may not have made as many films as some of us might have hoped, but if the distance between them is the price we pay for their authenticity, then that's okay, too.

It comes as a delight that, despite the message that may be sent by its unexpected box office failure, *Rules Don't Apply* is original, even magical entertainment, with something lovely to say about the real world. Lily Collins and Alden Ehrenreich perfectly play Howard Hughes employees who fall in love in 1958, despite the "rules" that say they shouldn't. They're caught between the kind of religion that denies love between people, or can't cope with the fact that we will all make mistakes on the way to knowing who we are; and the temptation to put money, position, and ultimately power before people. Playing Hughes, Beatty invests the character with a kind of vulnerability rare in portrayals of too-easily caricatured famous men. The psychological complexity that overcame Hughes is handled with sensitivity, and Beatty never lets the performance turn into attention-seeking awards bait or a joke at the expense of a powerful but distressed person. The side of Hughes's character with which we empathize doesn't erase the part that invites critique: his greed, obsession with control, and manipulations are here too. But what the film is really about is how to discern between the constrictive rules that diminish us all and those that might be, in fact, expansive and life-giving. *Rules Don't Apply* is a kind of serenity prayer for people caught between twin American obsessions: God grant me the courage to transcend harmful religious puritanism, and individualistic expansionism both.

With it, Beatty has made another genre-transcender: a compelling drama, with delicious light touches, that stirs the heart, too. It's a film that believes in the mysteries of love, and the necessity of forgiveness. Released after such a divisive election, it's also a gift from one of the U.S.'s most important film-makers: an invitation to reimagine the rules we live by, especially when they keep us apart.

Warren Beatty spoke to Gareth Higgins for *The Porch*. *Rules Don't Apply* is released to watch at home on February 28th, 2017. Please don't miss it.

Gareth Higgins: I've seen you for a long time talking about wanting to make a Howard Hughes film, and I'm wondering about the gestation of that?

Warren Beatty: I never got as interested as I need to be in doing a biopic of Howard Hughes—I didn't even feel the inclination to necessarily make him the center of the picture as I did with *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Bugsy* or John Reed in *Reds*. The more I thought about it, I wanted to do a movie involving the Hollywood that I came to in 1958/59, and what it was like, and the effects of what I would call changes that were taking place with the rise of feminism, and the effect that had on what we have grown to call the sexual revolution of the 1960s.

With Howard, I wasn't even sure that I was headed to do something that was more comedy than dramatic, or whether it was what we've grown to call a dramedy. But I always felt that the word that I would use in relation to the feelings I've had about Howard Hughes is that I've always been "amused by Hughes," the unusual things that he could demand and get away with. You know I never met him, but I sometimes feel that I met everyone that ever met him. What was so interesting to me is that people did not speak ill of him, they didn't speak badly of him, everybody kind of liked him, but they found him impossible to accommodate and deal with. They had respect for him, and I would say that his loneliness was a quite evident, and the idea that his being the recipient of enormous inheritance, wealth, one can see as being not only a big asset but also a burden.

GH: He actually feels to me of a piece with several of your other characters, thinking about Bulworth and John Reed particularly. They're all men out of their time, or trying to move time forward. They don't belong in the moment in which they exist; they're trying to push for something to happen that hasn't happened yet. That's quite a vulnerable thing. One of the things I liked is that you portray a man who has been previously portrayed as beyond eccentric, but this was quite a tender portrayal of a man who was scared and needed to hide.

WB: I think that Hughes' need to hide is one of the things that is most distinguishing about him, and it definitely has its comedic side. He needed to be in control; he felt he needed to be in control of the way he was seen.

GH: Because he was scared?

WB: Well we could interpret it in varying ways. We could say that it was a product of a very high level of narcissism, that he wanted to control how he was viewed. You could compare it to a number of movie actors. Greta Garbo comes to mind, who was always very mysterious; people always wanted to see more of her because you couldn't see her at all. I think that the ability to do that has sort of evaporated now with the technology that we are graced with and sometimes I say saddled with. There's not the level of privacy that used to be.

GH: How have you been able to cultivate a personal life or an inner life having been in the public eye for most of your life?

WB: Well, I guess I have a level of caution that sometimes I would have to define as a sensible paranoia, but I find that in the last years I've let go of that

more. But in fact maybe I just feel that I've let go of it more because I really don't spend a lot of time in public.

GH: Let's talk about the religious questions in *Rules Don't Apply*. You've got two lead characters caught between rules that no longer function and their desire for each other: the religious puritanism of both Lily Collins' and Alden Ehrenreich's characters, and the careerism of Alden's character which he doesn't really realize is getting in the way of his love. Where did this religious question arise for you?

WB: As a teenager in Virginia, I went through a very religious period of a few years that was concentrated in the Baptist church. I was not pushed or encouraged in that by other people, it was something that I did on my own. I didn't go immediately to Hollywood. I went to Northwestern university for a year, and then I went to New York, and studied acting for a year with a great teacher called Stella Adler. Then I played piano in a bar for a little while, playing what Joni Mitchell once called "vodka and tonic music." Then I got lucky and I started to get work as an actor to my surprise, and then I came out here. This all happened very quickly, and it was a very apparent difference in what you've referred to as the puritanism of the Baptist church in Virginia, which was not similar to a town, Hollywood, whose industry is in the merchandising of sexiness. With the rise of feminism in the late 50s and early 60s it became clear to me that America would not forever (in regard to the subject of sex) continue to be the laughing stock of France and other countries. That freedoms were inevitable.

The conflict and the consequences of these changes I found to be both comical and sad at times. Having these two young people come to Hollywood at the same time, she being a religious Baptist and he being a religious Methodist, and the restrictions and the guilt on one hand; Then on the other hand a very eccentric, unpredictable billionaire who did not feel that he had these restrictions, whom they worked for and to some extent had to accommodate in order to maintain their work relationship. In the whole conflagration of events that was entertaining.

GH: I think it really is. I think you may be the only director who has used *Onward Christian Soldiers* in two different films—in *Reds*, clearly a joke at the extent of puritanism. And in *Rules Don't Apply*, it's a way of conveying the sometimes monotonous experience of church. Presumably there was a point where your personal beliefs that you had participated in and found solace in the Baptist experience gave way to a different set of rules: a point where you changed your mind? I wonder if you'd be willing to talk about that, and whether you think *Rules Don't Apply* has particular relevance for today?

WB: The answer to the first part of your question, yes, there was a moment when I accepted that the first person that I would

have a sexual loving relationship with would not be in the eyes of God my wife. I would not be married to that person because I had a sexual relationship with her.

GH: What was that point?

WB: Well, I could make it funny, but I won't. It was a moment of what I, in retrospect, view as great clarity. I've had interesting and sometimes amusing conversations with others in describing that moment.

GH: I think it's a fairly common moment for people with a religious background. The question is whether or not you develop a healthy integrated life beyond that. I think a lot of people stay stuck or they live with misplaced guilt for a long time. I'm interested in what helps people integrate a sense of ethics and the common good with the knowledge that it's okay to have a few loving relationships in the course of a life.

WB: What I would say is that it produced something in me in viewing the society around me that it was not that I was afraid of marriage, having waited quite a long time to get married, it was that I was afraid of divorce. As I saw the huge increase in divorce and the acceptance of divorce, it was something that I simply didn't want to go through. I think that the number of divorced parents that I see in my

kids' schools tells me that I was not wrong. I'm not being disapproving of divorce, I'm simply saying that it was something that I didn't want to go through the pain of, nor did the people that I had loving relationships with. We agreed on the subject.

GH: As to what *Rules Don't Apply* might say to this moment? What I felt was that this film was not mocking one side or the other of a cultural divide but proposing a third way, and it has one of the most romantic, hopeful endings I've seen in recent years. It's okay for people from different backgrounds to choose a different set of rules than the ones they came up with because love trumps these. I'm wondering if that speaks to you, if you feel any different about now that we're after the election and so much seems to be uncertain.

WB: I'm much more comfortable not trying to sum up what I feel the contemporary relevance of the movie is at this point. I have a fear of being reductive. I really like what you said about it, and I agree with you, but I don't want to say what I think something means. I want the thing that I did to say it and for people to derive what they feel from it. And if you started me on the election we would be on the phone into the next century!



New Book: PROGRESS: TEN REASONS TO LOOK FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

Johan Norberg

Reviewed by Steve Tomkins

The introduction to Johan Norberg's ceaselessly optimistic *Progress* is entitled "The good old days are now." The epilogue is more pessimistically titled, "So why are you still not convinced?" I think Norberg is right on both points. The world we live in has indeed been getting better and better in countless ways, which we vastly underestimate and ought to appreciate more. But I am not entirely convinced by the thesis of this book, and I hope to explain why.

Norberg gathers together an array of evidence pointing to the conclusion that across the world every area of life has long been improving, and we have every reason to expect more of the same. People are better fed: In 1945 half of the world was under nourished. Today that figure is reduced to 11%. People live longer: Life expectancy worldwide was thirty years-old in the 18th century. Now it is seventy. Poverty is reducing: 50 million people a

year rise out of extreme poverty. Equality is increasing: In the year 1900 one country in the world allowed women to vote. In 2016 the only state where women had no role in the political process was the Vatican. Even in areas where we tend to feel the world is not progressing favorably, such as with violence, the statistics challenge, and offer hope. In the most "civilized" parts of Europe in the 15th century, the annual homicide rate was 30 per 100,000; now across Europe it is one per 100,000 (but five in the U.S.), and the trend continues downwards.

If these facts, and many others collected by Norberg, are true and representative, why do we often feel that the world is in a mess and under threat? Why do 71% of British people believe life is getting worse? We are living in a golden age. Why is this reality seemingly hidden from us?

Norberg's answer, and I'm sure he's right, is news. We don't click on the story that, once again, the annual global air safety record has slightly improved this year. Nor are we attracted to the headline that tells us the child mortality decreased by 0.005% again in Botswana. We click for news about the air crash and the devastating famine. Norberg suggests other factors too: Bad news has a greater emotional impact than good and stays with us longer; nostalgia dulls our memories of past hardships; we are biologically hardwired to take dangers and worries seriously. He might have added another: historical ignorance. Most of us have very little idea how violent, short, painful, unfair and unfree our ancestors' lives were.

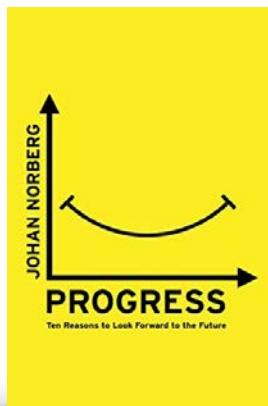
All this makes *Progress* a welcome survey of the historical landscape we live in today and the many long paths leading up to the peak of wellbeing on which we now stand. We should look around more. This is a book that can help us interrogate our fears a bit more rigorously and equip our hopes.

So why am I not convinced? Why can I not go all the way with Norberg? His explanation of why things have been getting better is twofold. First, the 18th century enlightenment replaced superstition with inquiry and authoritarianism with liberalism. Second and more importantly, the free market has created wealth, and greater wealth not only directly improves our lives in many ways but gives us incentives to improve it in all these other ways too. Wealth feeds the world and improves its health but also, for example, gives us the incentive to live peaceful lives and to look after our environment. The lesson is that so long as we let market forces take their natural course, wealth will increase and life will naturally get better.

The truth is more complex. Making the world better can be extremely hard work against the natural course of things and against market forces. Norberg touches on the abolition of the slave trade in Europe, an area I know something about, and gives the impression that abolition was the natural outcome of the enlightenment. Although enlightenment thinkers were involved, the campaign that fought slavery was largely driven by religion rather than the enlightenment, and they fought every step of the way against market forces. Things got better not just because things tend to get better, and certainly not

because wealth creation improves the world for everybody. They got better because people ignored such economic arguments and fought for what they believed in.

Similarly in Norberg's chapter on equality he celebrates the way societies have become more equal in terms of race, sex, and sexuality, but there is nothing on economic equality. Perhaps that is because this one does not seem to be getting better: the gap between the rich and poor in most developed countries widened in the decades before the 2008 crash and has worsened since, with serious consequences. This one is not a cause for optimism but for a fight.

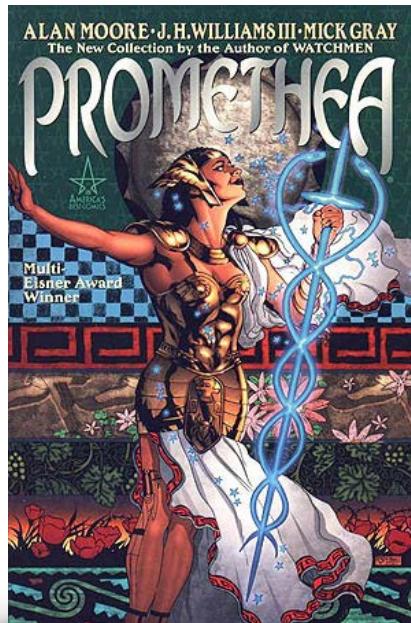


The real test case for *Progress* is climate change. A catastrophe is unfolding: 2016 was already the hottest year on record by October; 2015 and 2014 also beat all previous records; and the U.S. is reported to be scrapping NASA's climate research. Norberg's response to this is shockingly evasive. He claims that the result of increased carbon emissions is "hotly debated." It is not debated among scientists, even if it is denied by right-wing extremists. Norberg says, "the worst-case scenario is unlikely" and that climate change may be "minor and beneficial." Though Pacific islands are in peril and dengue fever has swept Bangladesh, Norberg offers the consolation that "almost twice as many Americans died from excess cold as from excess heat from 1979 to 2006." At this point Norberg's theory seems to be morally and intellectually broken. If your belief that things "just get better" allows you to airbrush the greatest crisis of our age from your worldview, something has gone wrong with your theory. The ideology that market forces will solve everything is disproved by climate change, just as it was by the slave trade, and to cling to it in the face of such a crisis is complacent and negligent.

There comes a point when optimism is not enough. At that point you need hope. The two may look similar but are seriously different. Optimism believes things are better than they seem and will turn out well. Hope knows that however bad things are turning out it is still worth fighting. Optimistically celebrating the great days we live in is good and right, but carrying on the fight that got us here is even more important.

Classic Book:
PROMETHEA
by Alan Moore, J. H.
Williams III, Mick Gray,
Charles Vess;
WildStorm, 2001

Reflections by
Jasmin Pittman Morrell



When I first saw an image of Alan Moore's science fiction heroine, Promethea, it was as if she'd already been submerged somewhere in the pools of my subconscious, just waiting to surface and greet me like an old friend. It was an eerily resonant experience. I had not read many graphic novels, but this panel I stumbled across featured a muscular, dreadlocked woman hovering slightly above the ground, wielding a glowing, blue caduceus. She was part-goddess, part-terrestrial, both divine and human. Her enemies cowered before her, though in that moment she was not threatening them with physical violence. Utterly confident, her words undergirded her obvious power.

"I am the holy splendor of the imagination. I cannot be destroyed."

I was smitten, my response to her immediate and visceral. Typically relegated to the domain of children and dreamers, I'd overlooked the imagination as an active, sacred thing of splendor and power, a

necessary element for use alongside the quest for transformation and wisdom. Regardless, keeping company with children and dreamers sounds like a pretty sweet gig.

Promethea was originally published in five volumes between 1999-2005. The story follows college student Sophie Bangs' relationship with an idea-form called Promethea. Sophie traces the evolution of Promethea, a recurring character she finds strewn throughout history in literature and pop culture. When Sophie discovers that *she* is the latest, and most powerful, incarnation of Promethea, she becomes an indelibly unstoppable being: the living embodiment of the creative force of imagination.

This was the dream I rediscovered while nestled on the couch under a fleece blanket, sipping hot honeyed-tea in an attempt to vanquish the cold that had slowed me down long enough to allow for this dip into fantasy, into play.

As the mother of two young girls, I'm often inundated with the care and management of my family's every-day life. I play a fairly stereotypical gender role as a wife and mother; in the private sphere, I work by caring for my family. In the public sphere, my expression of care is the work I do out in the world. And like so many other contemporary women, we find it difficult to value, balance, and care for the various aspects of our own wise, tender, and strong selves. I needed a simultaneously fantastical and grounding image, an archetypal bridge between the space of matter and spirit. Put another way, I needed to see qualities typically associated with the feminine as infinitely robust. I needed a renovation of the sci-fi action hero as a female-bodied figure whose primary strength is rooted in her use of language. I needed Promethea, reminder of the ability of words to create and destroy. More than just a reading experience, she has become something of my own personal Muse, an affirmation of my own creative life.



As Sophie explores her role as Promethea, we are guided through an exploration of magic and mysticism, the tarot and Kabbalah. True to Moore's style, the narrative is far-reaching and somewhat non-linear, a tale that takes us from ancient Egypt, to futuristic New York, and a realm called the Immateria. Fictional and historical public figures make surprise appearances; so many, in fact, that keeping up with them all is like trying to track the characters in a 19th century Russian novel. Angels and demons take expected and unexpected forms; if you saw the character "Boo-Boo" Ramirez, a foul-mouthed guardian angel coming, you are a wiser and more astute reader than I. A journey climbing the Tree of Life delineates the full array of human experience. Sophie-Promethea and her friend Barbara, pass through a literal "ocean of emotion," die, and are reborn again on the pathway of the Tree of Life. At the bottom of the Tree, when I

can be brought to tears by the symbolic image of Jesus on a cross, despite how my typical response to that image has been inoculated by its proliferation, I know I've had some kind of awakening. While Barbara, Promethea, and Boo-Boo gaze up at a crucified Jesus, Boo-Boo remarks, "But even down here, at the lowest Auschwitz end of what humans are, and what humans do, our highest point is still with us. There's light. Always remember that. There's light at the bottom." A reminder of the divine in us, where I least expected to encounter it. A reminder that even on my worst day, when I'm in the proverbial pits, I'm not alone. A reminder that even on my country's worst day, when darkness threatens to overwhelm, the light of goodness is not lost, and hope may sprout in unexpected places.

Promethea's artistic style, helmed by J. H. Williams III, is also experimental and varied.

Photorealism, painting, and line-drawing all serve the narrative in a way that supports what this sweeping chronicle aspires to be: profound, beautiful, and a bit cacophonous. If the artwork were a juxtaposition of poetry, it would be like rolling Allen Ginsberg, Emily Dickinson, Beyoncé, and Billy Collins onto one riotous canvas.

And the poets would all agree: It's imperative that we pay the tool of language the respect it deserves. Promethea, who eventually becomes the harbinger of the Apocalypse, almost comically (pun not completely intended), if not prophetically, has something to say to us. If we do not weave stories of connection to our neighbors, our land, our world, and ourselves perhaps we will bring about a kind of ending. The kind of ending that urges us to begin again, to open to imagination's incredible gifts and bounty.

Olly Olly In Come Free

It is 1971; a suburban summer where
after supper seems to stretch to everlasting.
My brothers and I are unleashed
and running toward what we do not know,
what we have not yet learned to pray.

We are a neighborhood gang
of boys and girls just starting
to sense the difference. We hold a little
too tight
in pickup football, hide and seek
kisses with fingers crossed in hopes
the street lights don't come on too soon.

The games have begun, sure enough. They come
tripping over the edge of innocence,
like Avon masks the smell of my first puff
on a rolled leaf cigarette,
like mascara coats my lashes though mom says
I look like two holes burned in a white sheet.

This is when presence needs no practice.
This is the headiness of dusk light,
a shadowed shrub, and a neighbor boy
who waits breathless beside me,
but doesn't kiss me, yet.

What happens next must be a dream, not of the almost kiss,
or the boy, but of a voice cloaked in darkness
calling out to us. Do you remember it like I do?

This is a memory of a dream I didn't know I had,
an echo carried through the wilderness of my childhood
in a voice I am just learning to believe;

Olly olly in come free, all who are out, come in.

You, with blue jeans stained and torn from kneeling,
head crowned with bits of goldenrod and sage,
bring your brother, your lover, each piece of heaviness,
and come.

The game is of your own design; there are no penalties
or just rewards. Lights are lit on these familiar streets,
and all is well. Leave your hiding place,

come home.
Olly olly in come free, all who are out, come in.

—Lesley-Anne Evans



PRIVATE ENERGY

Helado Negro

discussed by Tyler McCabe

NO EASY TRANSMISSION

Here we are in a new year with so much work to do. Lately, I wake up before the sun rises, wash my face, shimmy into clothes, and press some food into a pan, thinking dark and hopeful thoughts, pleading with my gods, and then I find myself once again turning on Helado Negro's recently released fifth LP, *Private Energy*, to focus my mind. I think it is more expressive and possibly corrective of these times than I could possibly be.

Which isn't to say that this album is political commentary, nor that Helado Negro's career belongs only to this moment. Roberto Carlos Lange has made music under multiple names over many years, and the Helado Negro moniker simply describes his most ambitious persona, a voice that spans languages, landscapes, and private interiors. The name "Helado Negro," which translates to "black ice cream," captures several angles of his work—music that is strange, sweet, spooky, racially inflected, and whimsical. Lange pumps up this persona like a tent and invites you inside for the show. At the same time, he uses "Helado Negro" to hide and convey hiddenness. But expansiveness and mystery have always gone hand-in-hand. In one song he describes his intent, "Looking for universal supply," and realizes: "Physical dimensions don't hold me back anymore."

I should note that non-Spanish-speakers like myself may perceive a greater sense of mystery in this music than others, as most of the songs are in Spanish. (Those in the same boat as me might welcome this small experience of being an outsider, since we're so often afforded linguistic dominance. Or think of it as the perfect workday soundtrack, since the words won't interrupt your train of thought.) Anyway, this note is relevant: Helado Negro is on a music label dominated by English-limited artists, performs regularly for large crowds of English-limited fans, and is reviewed most often in English. Gaps in understanding are inherent in his work and performances, and he makes the most of them. The lingual divide between the art and the context it's often placed in expresses and enhances the themes central to *Private Energy*: isolation and connection, the work of staking out a "self" and somehow still crossing over to others.

This is where his art has something timely to say, at least to me, right now, because this is when I'm listening. (Pre-dawn, pouring coffee, stirring eggs.) How can any of us cross over to the other? How can we restore a state of listening? (The egg yolks break as Helado Negro sings, "I feel invincible without your wisdom / but I feel invisible without your wit. / There's no easy way for me to make

this transmission.") *Private Energy* describes our paradox, the ground rules. The selfhood of each person contains something unknowable, yet a person's unknowable self is always right there before you, like a word you can't translate. It has an energy all its own, which you can't name; you can only encircle it with other words and hopefully thus crown it.

Helado Negro sings like an old school crooner, his voice honeyed and warbling. With this album he leaves behind some of the glitchier sounds and schizoid compositions of former works, opting instead for guitar and synth lines in bold and somnolent waves. A few tracks—for instance, "We Don't Have Time for That"—get up to a pace that's so enjoyable, so funky, I dare you not to hit replay. All around, Helado Negro has adhered more tightly to pop song structures, making these songs his most accessible yet. It's all well-matched to an album equally in love with its own unique self and deeply desirous of connecting to listeners. *Private Energy* achieves those dual intentions—staying in and going out of itself—by cultivating personal and collective pride. I would add that it's not just pride, but pride at a time when it can feel dangerous to display pride, or at the very least exists as a subversive act. This pride is Helado Negro's magic ingredient. His music makes self-love not only a prerequisite for connection, but the connective tissue itself. On "Young, Latin and Proud," he sings, "You grow older knowing that you'll always be this one thing / and you'll have this / to be you / and the people / who'll be waiting here for you / always will be one with you / and you'll be one with me." You can hear the grammar beginning to break down here as "you" and "me" begin slowly, wonderfully to collapse in a celebration of Latin identity.

I am, like many of Helado Negro's fans, not Latin. But in the heat of music, identity politics start to sweat. I am watching the parade of this music, sometimes on the sidelines, sometimes amid the crowd, and believing that this celebration of private selves will unite us. That's the work ahead, work inside for outside.

I went to an Helado Negro concert in Seattle once. On stage he had a dancer dressed from head to toe in a pile of silver tinsel, which is also the photograph on *Private Energy*'s album cover. The dancer was completely encased: faceless, textural, bright, and hidden. The tinsel figure shuddered, letting light wash down their body in slow waves. I felt whatever it is that radiates from us uncontrollably. I received a secret I am only beginning to translate.

VII.

A moral lesson this might teach
Were I ordained and called to
preach;

For men are prone to go it blind
Along the calf-paths of the mind,

And work away from sun to sun,
To do what other men have done.

They follow in the beaten track,
And out and in, and forth and
back,

And still their devious course
pursue,
To keep the path that others do.

They keep the path a sacred
groove,
Along which all their lives they
move.

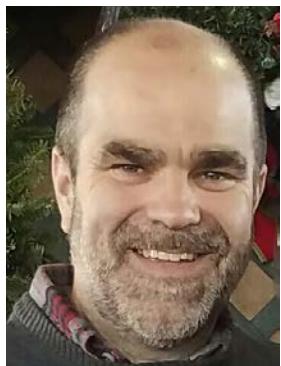
But how the wise old wood gods
laugh,
Who saw the first primeval calf.

Ah, many things this tale might
teach—
But I am not ordained to preach.

—The Calf Path, Sam Foss
1895



MELVIN BRAY



MICHAEL CITRINI



STEVE DAUGHERTY



LESLEY-ANNE EVANS



CATHLEEN FALSANI



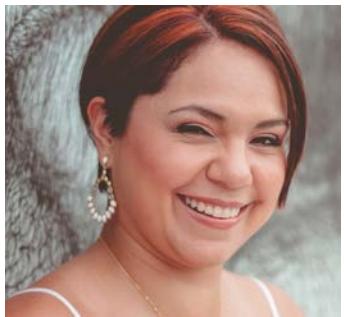
MONA HAYDAR



GARETH HIGGINS



MICHELLE LeBARON



TERESA PASQUALE MATEUS



TYLER McCABE



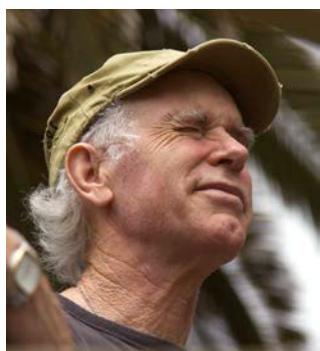
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JASMIN PITTMAN MORRELL



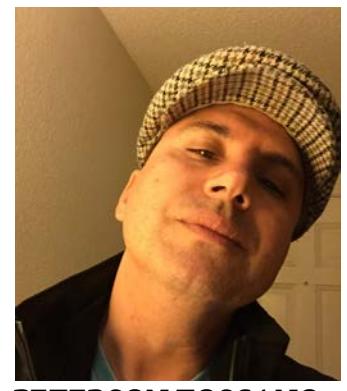
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MIKE RIDDELL



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