

LISTEN, LITTLE MAN!

Reflections one dark morning

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How should I live? And what is worthwhile?

I ask these questions one cold April morning when I am feeling particularly dark and gloomy, forbidding and unapproachable.

What is worthwhile? Of course, my work as a lover and a father and as a teacher is worthwhile. My thinking through some of the epistemological issues in the western mindset is worthwhile, my practice of co-operative research is worthwhile. But is that enough?

Suppose it is true, suppose that the planet *is* heading for a significant ecological breakdown, when then is worthwhile? Suppose, for example, the Gulf stream changes direction, or fails, so that the UK becomes as cold as Spitzbergen? Or suppose the desertification of Africa means mass starvation and a huge migration of African people into Europe, refugees, a racist response in Europe, and much violence? Suppose the... well suppose anything. Suppose a situation in which this comfortable world of ours, with our minuscule attempts to behave sustainably and decently, suppose that all breaks down?

What would I do if fascist thugs were beating up black people in the street outside my house? What would I do if there was not enough food, if we were all frozen, if we had to run along sniper alleys as they did in Sarajevo?

So here I am indulging in my grumbles about not knowing what to do with this precious time I have for writing, when within my lifetime I might have to respond, with courage and decency, to major crises. What would be called of me and would I be able to respond? Well, I quite simply don't know.

I suspect the most likely crisis will not be a crisis at all, but rather a slow degeneration of quality of life and of democratic institutions. I suspect the challenge will be not dramatic and heroic, but call for a response to gradual loss, as we all work closer to the limits of what is possible, the limits to capitalist growth. It will be easy to pass off one loss after another, like the frog in gradually heated water not realizing it is being boiled alive, we will accept one loss of freedom after another until we live in physical and emotional poverty. What then will be called for? Certainly not gloomy writing. Heroism, maybe?

Well, heroism is probably *not* what we need, although it may be called for from time to time. And I don't really think I am of heroic temperament, although I imagine I should be. What is called for is a quiet decency and prophecy. Well, where did that word come from? From Matthew Fox, of course:

... raising consciousness or educating or struggling to make justice happen in the midst of so much injustice. A spiritual warrior assisting the birth of the environmental revolution—that is the work of prophetic “interfering” that needs doing today...¹

Prophecy means speaking the unspeakable with clarity and courage. It means speaking against the current habits of thought without anger, but with love and concern. Oh, but the words are so easy (except they are not, they are really difficult) but how does one walk the talk?

And this takes me back to the present moment. Here I am with the immense privilege of sitting at an excellent word machine with no demands but the morning's writing. Yet within me rumbles a critical dislike of what I am doing, of my fellow women and men, of the very enterprise of writing anything at all. No point. That which is important cannot be spoken, so why keep trying? But at least I could face the impossibility with love and companionship, rather in this dark and withdrawn fashion.

So what is it that needs to be released, to be let go? If this is a *via negativa*, a dark morning of the soul, let me engage with that fully and with courage. Let me honour the dark morning rather than scorn it and denigrate it. Part of the darkness is my complete self-absorption. I have been gazing out of the window without really looking through it, just gazing blankly into my own sense of hopelessness. I have been gazing similarly at my fellows all this week, only rarely being willing to encounter the sharp light of their life in their eyes.

Listen, Little Man!

Listen to what is true: for our world is dying!

Shall I list for you the ways in which she is dying? I could begin with the poisoned air we breath, with the sunlight which now scorches us. I could tell you of the fish which no longer swim in the sea, and of the millions and millions of tons of topsoil which are washed away every year. Did you know that there are no cod on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland? Did you know that we lose the equivalent of all the wheat fields in Australia, every year?

¹ Fox, Matthew (1996) *Confessions: the making of a postdenominational priest*, New York, HarperSanFrancisco. p. 279.

I could point to the street children in South America and Asia, selling themselves for sex on the streets, shot by policemen as vermin. To the families living on the garbage tip in Cartagena, living by re-cycling the so-called waste of the city. To the remnants of the first peoples of the Americas, cut to pieces by European racism. To the cultural history of slavery branded into people of the African Diaspora.

Or nearer home, how about looking at the death which is the motor car, the death which is the M5 motorway, our own dying as we fail to notice the destruction we have all caused, simply in our everyday travels.

Listen, Little Man!

Do you not know that our industrial civilization could only happen this once, this one time when what we call the “resources” of Mother Earth have been so plentiful that we could pick them out of the ground, consume them, and throw them away again! For that is what we do: each time we get into the car, or drink from a polystyrene cup, or turn on the hot tap, we throw away in an instant that which it has taken millennia to form.

For we are nearly at the limits to growth, nearly at the limits of this planet's carrying capacity, and at those limits there is no free space, nothing to spare, no room to move, no place to go. We are brought up hard against our own extravagant wastefulness. At the limits to growth ecological systems, economic systems will behave in strange, violent and unpredictable ways, and there is no longer freedom or security.

So Listen, Little Man! and Listen, Little Woman!

Can it be that you have not heard that the Earth is dying? And do you not know that if the Earth is dying then you are dying, and your children are dying, and their children, not yet born, are already dying too? Do you know that the woodpecker is dying—that the skylarks are nearly all dead?

So I asked the goddess, “What should I tell them? and what should I do?” And she told me, “Just keep telling it. Don't think you can get it right in one go, for it is too much for one telling. But just keep listening to the news of the death of the world, and just keep telling people. You must keep the news moving.”

So, do you know that the West Antarctic Ice shelf may be collapsing? Do you know that half the Black Forest is dying from pollution? Do you know we cannot afford to burn the oil that BP is discovering in the North Atlantic because of the damage it will do to the atmosphere?

Do you know that the management at Dounreay atomic energy establishment have been dropping radioactive waste down a hole in the ground in Scotland

for thirty years and *they don't even know what they have dropped down there!*
AND THAT YOU AND I WILL HAVE TO PAY TO CLEAN IT ALL UP! **AND**
THAT WE HAVE TO TRUST THE PEOPLE WHO DROPPED THE
WASTE IN TO CLEAR IT UP FOR US!

And so I ask the goddess again, "What should I do? And what can I tell them?"
And she said, "You must reach into your heart for your love of the world, and
your love of all your fellow creatures". And I said, "Well, it is difficult to love
when you are gloomy, and there really are a lot of idiots around". And she
said, "Well, that is just the point. You got it in one!"

And she said, "You know, I can help you, and you know how I can help you.
You just have to make space to listen to the silence of the world, the silence
that lies behind the song of the birds and the hum of the motorway. You have
to make the space to duck under the everyday and sit for a while in the beauty
of it all. So *Listen, Little Man!* You know what you have to do: you must both
face the horror of the death of the world, and speak the truth as you know it
and see it. *And* you must listen in wonder to the presence of the world. And
you will know what to do and how to be."

I wonder when I will listen?

Peter Reason
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With respects to Wilhelm Reich and Friedrich Nietzsche