ART | RESEARCH international
A Transdisciplinary Journal

THE LIFE OF BLOSSOM: LIVING POETICALLY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

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Abstract: Scientists indicate that we are living in the Anthropocene, an epoch marked by unprecedented human impact on the planet. Our ecological predicament poses a significant challenge to human consciousness as we experience a pivotal moment in planetary history. Following the work of Mary Oliver, Carl Leggo, Kathleen Dean Moore, and other poetic luminaries, we consider what it means to live poetically in the Anthropocene, to experience beauty and meaning amidst depletion and radical

ecological change, to weep for the disappearance of species while working toward personal and systemic transformation. We ask: How does poetry contribute to a flourishing life in a time of ecological crisis? Why is poetry an especially potent vehicle of human expression and transformation? In a dialogic format, the authors exchange reflections on poetic inquiry, and muse on the importance of poetry as a vehicle for investigation and reformation.

Keywords: poetic inquiry; anthropocene; ecological crisis; environmental education; ecological ethics; science education

Prelude

The term *Anthropocene* has been circulating among ecological theorists and geologists for some time. Thomas Berry (1999) and Zalasiewicz et al. (2010) have alluded to a geological epoch marked by human activity. The extent of human impact on the planet is increasingly alarming, as scientists now consider the unfolding implications of the Anthropocene (Waters et al., 2016) and the ramifications of anthropogenic climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014).

The spectre of climate change has the potential to affect most plant and animal life on the planet. The Earth, a primary system that generates the propitious conditions for life, is the great unifier that nourishes all beings. The profusion of human cultural and technological achievement has been supported by the temperate climate of the inter-glacial period following the Pleistocene. However, the advent of the Anthropocene marks a new epoch of geological history, where tumultuous ecological disruptions will dramatically impact global civilization and human culture. Bob Jickling (2018) and other *Wild Pedagogies* philosophers argue that "any educational conception and delivery that results in inculcation into present cultural norms…will do nothing to change the current trajectory nor prepare learners for the new reality" (p. 59). Given this, we must turn to alternative theorists that discern our complicit nature in the industrial-exploitative paradigm.

According to deep ecology, the environmental crisis stems from a fractured human consciousness in relation to land and the web of life (Berry, 2006; Devall & Sessions, 2001). Recognizing our membership in a disruptive species, we, the authors, cannot help but confront our destructive impulses. The path to ecological harmony cuts through our inner landscapein navigating doubt and despair, we witness our own complicity in modern capitalist-industrial systems of exploitation. Conversely, the possibility of healing and reconnection cannot be found outside the very consciousness that has wreaked havoc. As educators, environmentalists, and nature-lovers in an over-developed, Western nation (Canada), we, the authors, continue to be troubled by our participation in the current system, and have committed much of our lives to personal and collective transformation. How does one abide the inevitable anguish related to the demise of a beloved paradise? How do we hold the pain of watching wildfires burn and rivers run dry? What space is there for joy and delight in a time of ecological turmoil? How does one live meaningfully in the Anthropocene, and

how might such a life help to redress planetary devastation? Following the work of Jane Hirshfield (1997), Carl Leggo (2005, 2012, 2019), Kathleen Dean Moore (1995), Mary Oliver (1995, 2016), and others, we present a dialogue that explores poetry as a form of personal practice that shapes and transforms personal consciousness: a method of inquiry, and an emancipatory vehicle of personal development and environmental activism.

The Conversation

David Chang (DC): Lee, let's start with you. What does it mean to live poetically in the Anthropocene?

Lee Beavington (LB): Poetry brings what Bai (2015) calls an "animated perception" to the world. Objectified nature is lifeless. To address the Anthropocene, we need to cultivate the ability to see and acknowledge the more-than-human: the winter wren singing at dawn, the Sitka spruce laden with cones, the white-capped mountains and rivers. For me, living poetically is to recognize ordinary beauty, to see a mesmerizing world in a dewdrop, to marvel at leaf veins that convert light into life. As poet Mary Oliver (2016) wrote, "Humility is the prize of the leaf-world" (p. 7). To witness creativity in the world is to witness your own creative being. The concise language of poetry can bring clarity to this vision. Specificity is tied to intention. Precise word choice and imagery can evoke a profound personal expression.

DC: So poetry brings clarity to one's vision. Clarity of language is clarity of thought. In a way, word-craft can be person-craft, a way to shape thinking and being, a way of forging perspective. Carl Leggo (2005) has suggested that language can be used to "question and play with and savour and ruminate on notions of truth" (p. 178). In writing poetry, one becomes not only the author of the poem, but of life's possibilities. To me, poetry is precisely this act of constructing possibilities. Are there times when a poetic thought shifted your views on something?

LB: Certainly. For me, David Abram's writing stimulates the senses in a visceral and relational way. His book *Becoming Animal* (2011) puts forth, rather poetically, countless small and nuanced perceptual shifts that bring me to fuller presence. Being more in tune with my animality, I listen to the wings of birds thrumming the wind, follow the tidal patterns from low ebb to crashing flow, notice how loudly the fluorescent light bulb in my office buzzes. Mary Oliver (2016) writes that

“attention is the beginning of devotion” (p. 8). In this state of attunement, I am cognizant of my breath and shadow—but also of noise pollution and smoggy skies, the unrelenting human-centered progress that has numbed my senses. If Abram had written his book less poetically, more in the form of a science textbook, we might gain knowledge, but have little opportunity for ontological shifts.

Furthermore, I find that the act of writing crystallizes thought. To evoke an image both unexpected yet resonant inevitably shifts, however imperceptibly, my worldview toward that new perception. As Leggo (2019) writes, poetry is “a kind of discourse that invites us to slow down and linger with stories and rhythms and silence and possibilities” (p. 39). I’ve been working on a poem about amoeba called “Intimate Immensity”; the first draft spoke to membranes, cytoplasmic streaming, and the amorphous nature of this creature’s existence, with no relation to human experience. Through this poem I discovered my proclivity to initially write from an objective perspective: rational, scientific, alienating. The subsequent draft connected the amoeba to the birth of my first child. Suddenly, emotion and subjectivity entered the poem, pushing/igniting/bringing static facts to wondrous relationality. “We cannot learn to love by attending to the abstract and universal,” said Carl Leggo (as cited in Pinar, 2019, p. x). “We need to begin with small acts of love” (p. x). Here’s an excerpt from my poem:

inside my every cell
inner nebula fold as a labyrinth
layers of DNA and lipid—
a coiled nest of centipede
legs in constant motion
each part touches every other
yet holds a constant shape
my son folded in the womb
his head on the placental pillow
an umbilical thread that I quiver to cut

How about you, David? Have you had a moment when a poem that you’ve written or read shifted your views?

DC: Yes. I was once caught in the rain on a cold afternoon in March. I was entirely unprepared for the downpour and found myself drenched. However, I discovered the creative impetus to compose a poem in my mind, which gave

voice to my frustration. In doing so, I stumbled onto a different experience of the rain.

I Wish

I wish to be away from this damn rain
Catching me on this dark afternoon
Nothing on me but a thin denim coat
Soaking in this torrent
Hair plastered to my face
Droplets gathering on my chin
I wish I were in my study
Looking out at the gray curtain of precipitation
Perched on my leather chair
I'd be glad to be warm and dry
Pitying the hapless few who must brave the storm
I wish to be away from this damn rain
Each nefarious drop seeping into
The crevasses of my fractured patience
Each step in this tortured slog
I long to be anywhere but here
Soaking, in this damn rain

I was at first resentful of being in the rain, but the poetic apprehension of a momentary affect suddenly transformed my experience. My resentment subsided, and frustration turned into amusement as I shuffled the words that would become the first few lines. The emotive force of my experience was somehow sublimated through the composition of the poem. I had forgotten about the inconvenience of rain. Tickled by the arrangement of words, I was fully present in my circumstance. Frustration became both the subject and the pathos of the poem, but the act of poeticism transformed my experience the *speaker* is resentful and desired to be elsewhere, the *poet* found a delightful space within the *practice of poetry* that conferred an acceptance of the moment. So in this case, the *act of composition* is transformative, a way of holding experience and dwelling more gracefully in the present.

LB: I like how you describe the power of composition. Thomas Berry (1999) portrays the universe as a creative entity and creative expression as a path

toward renewal of the world and the self. In a way, poetry attempts to find unity across divergent realms, similar to ecological science that reveals the threads of connection between whale and barnacle, or salmon and Douglas-fir.

DC: It occurs to me that you are a scientist who writes poetry, or better yet, a poet who practices science. How does the poetry play into your science training? Does poetry help you unite with the barnacle and the salmon?

LB: I'm a biological *and* social *and* creative scientist, and they don't always get along. The problem with labels is they put you in a box, and once you're quarantined in a specific discipline you have to fight like mad to get out. Kem Luther (2016), in his book *Boundary Layer*, explains that the Greeks saw nature as mind, scientists saw a machine, while the Romantics saw process, an ecological dynamism. As humans and scientists we like to classify, categorize, atomize and ultimately separate. My poem, "The Circle," explores the relationship between the atomistic and the universal.

The Circle

thoughtless breath
sucks in the world
lungs—an inverted tree
windpipe—a trunk to leafy alveoli
spider webs, air sacs
snare oxygen exhaled by gods
into a pulmonary cocoon

hemoglobin
filled with atmospheric spirit
vessels borne in plant and animal
the dance of O_2—chloroplast to mitochondria
leaves the twig for the capillary that
digs into muscle and bone

hormones pollinate
red blood cells—
billions of messenger bees
in an endless circuit
artery to vein, vein to artery

death comes slow to these gods of old
microscopic Hermes
runs the organ gauntlet
spleen to pancreas
to Stygian pituitary
a race toward a galaxy of synapses
home to thought
and mind
and memory
with the nerve to believe
you are different

oxygen is a circle
a ring that holds
gods and bees and blood
every thoughtless breath
exhales carbon for the trees
that still stand upright

what keeps you breathing?

DC: This poem ends with an intriguing question. It seems to me that carbon and oxygen, basic molecules that compose organic matter, is still a step away from "life" on the experiential plane. We don't *feel* oxygen and carbon *per se*, but rather air and wind that's warm, or cold and crisp. We know that material matter springs into action in an organism, yet the manifestation of such synchronicity comes across as something irreducible. We can study atoms and molecules, and they have discrete properties and characteristics, but the vivacity and spontaneity of life registers on another gestalt. We can point to the compositional materials, but there is something else that we cannot easily point to. . . something phenomenological that cannot be adequately described by their material composites. So, maybe poetry is a way to suggest the mystery, to point toward the ineffable?

LB: Poetry does this in a way most science textbooks, bound by their objective-rational-reductionist approach, cannot. That's not to say that scientific precision isn't important. Lack of precision on a cellular level would crumble our tissue into entropic dust. The closer you study the human body, the more you recognize the miraculous nature of our existence. Yet we must be cautious not to overlook our

holistic view. As philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore (1995) ponders, “If you take anything down to its tiniest pieces, spread them out and make a diagram, and then put them all back together again, can you be sure you have the thing you started with….Or has it become something different, something less than the sum of its parts?” (p. 113). Wonder stems, not from isolated details, but from the integrated whole.

DC: So we have science on the one hand, which proceeds on the assumption that the cosmos is intelligible; on the other, we have something experiential, numinous, and irreducible. I do not want to suggest that they run counter to each otherin fact, I think they are two takes on the same thing. I’m just wondering how poetry facilitates their integration.

LB: In the book *Einstein and Buddha*, McFarlane (2002) speaks to experience as the foundation of both science and mysticism: “through direct investigation, the mystic and the scientist alike find reality’s deeper truths” (p. 33). By dwelling in the ambiguous spaces, in the liminal knots of relation, we can discover the connective tissue between us and the environment. Faulkner and England (2020) similarly argue that “both poetry and science seek to contain chaos through form, and through experimentation and manipulation, to arrive at new (and often complex) understandings or solutions to the conundrums and idiosyncrasies that plague our ever-evolving environment” (p. xxii). Through metaphor and metonym and other figurative language, poetry holds relational capacity, a way to dance within and across boundary layers into ecological and emotional webs of reciprocity. By placing words that seem discordant side-by-side on the page, or inventing an image that compares a rock to a heart or an amoeba to a planet, new meanings can emerge, windows into the ineffable. With my science training, I sometimes throw too much terminology into my poems, which distances me from the reader.

DC: So poetry is a way of knocking loose those familiar, conditioned schemas through novel combinations of concepts, words, and associations.

LB: Exactly. Poetry finds beauty in despair, light in darkness. In this way, writing poetry is an act of resistance, a statement of wonder. Alternatively, poetry can explore our shadow side, the hidden seams of our existence that lurk in the voiceless places. A poem’s power is its specificity—sensorial, personal, close to the heart, painfully precise. I find my poetry is enriched by relational experience: that is, by bringing the *speaker* and the *poet* closer together. An omniscient voice

that makes grand general statements feels detached—or worse, patronizing. I struggle with being too didactic. I'll often revise poems to have less us/we and more I/my statements. Precision and evocation are key, letting the poem present my voice and intimacy via meticulous language and imagery. Evoke more, tell less.

DC: Picking up on your comments about finding beauty in despair—given the seriousness of environmental decline, despair is an inevitable part of my growing awareness. Developments in consciousness, personal and collective, involve pangs of guilt, anger, and an underlying anguish that never fully subsides. For me, this pain is a writhing tension between modes of consciousness. I am no longer at home in the world that I know; at the same time, I cannot easily affect the arrival of an alternate life, situated as I am in a vast anthropocentric civilization, having internalized the values of a capitalist-consumer culture. Thus, I find myself astride two worlds: one bound to die, the other powerless to be born. This frame of consciousness, marked by contradiction and frustration, produces an ongoing ontological anguish. Yet this anguish, like the febrile volcano, is a generative force. In the smoke of inner turmoil, a new inner landscape is being forged. Recently, bemoaning the rapid warming of the planet, evinced by record-breaking temperatures and the extinction of species across the globe, I once again felt the weight of compunction, mourning the damage that has been wrought upon the planet. Yet, it was spring, and the air was redolent with lilacs and tender new maple leaves. Although heavy with grief, I was at once taken by the fragrant air. In the following poem, I reflect on the jarring incongruity between the experiences of personal complicity while surrounded by gratuitous beauty.

Why Should the Flowers Bloom?

Why should the flowers bloom for me?
This perfume of sweet remembrance
The cold soil stirring to life
The petals opening again to light
Affirmations of ageless elation
Why should the birds sing for me?
The few warblers on my block still recite
Their wistful song of delight
After the verdant canvas of lush velvet
Gave way to concrete blocks and glassy panes
The chorus of jubilant voices

Reduced to a scattered ensemble
The warblers still croon their tremulous song
Why should this beauty still linger
To mesmerize one who lives in bitter spite?
The prodigal son who is prodigal still,
Even at the beckon and cry of his Mother.
I do not understand this tireless munificence
This splendour that ever endures
Even to the ocean's end, the stars' fading light
And why should the flowers bloom for me?

LB: I sense that intense personal voice and inner struggle in the poem. Almost like a self-recrimination. You are drowning in beauty.

DC: Yes, although reading it now, I am struck by how self-consumed I was, as if everything was blooming *for me*. How self-consumed! On the other hand, the poem articulates a paradox that is central to my own experience of being alive at this moment in human history. I am a member of an inventive and destructive species that has radically altered the biosphere. I am complicit in the Anthropocene, but at the same time I love and cherish this planet; dwell in lamentation and delight at the same time. This tension stretches my inner capacity and challenges me to see the interpenetrating truths of life: beauty is inseparable from pain, light radiates amidst darkness, joy springs from mourning. To me, no medium expresses such aporias more poignantly than poetry. Poets veer close to the edge, and attempt "the making of a form out of the formlessness that is beyond the edge" (Oliver, 1995, p. 6). This formless often takes shape in the paradox, which confounds conditioned intelligence and gives shape to a more capacious awareness.

LB: Transforming the self is, to me, a vital part of the journey. Yet the journey does not end here. In the hero's journey, after the treasure (i.e., wisdom) is found, the next task of the hero or heroine is to return home and share this wisdom (Campbell, 2017).

We are relational beings. And not just humans: tree roots are sheathed in a web of interconnective fungi, flowers attract and gift pollinators, important bacteria live in our belly buttons. No species exists in isolation. Poetry is inherently relational, comprised of language's connective tissue; words are the

bone, figures of speech the muscle. So writing a nature poem cultivates a sense of kinship. This kinship, I believe, can lead to changes in belief and then action.

DC: On the subject of connection and action, some people may think that poetry is a very nice, but ultimately frivolous, luxury. The oceans are warming regardless of what poets write. They might say that the sublimation of one's personal experience is merely a retreat to a private heaven. What do you think about this? Of what relevance is poetry to runaway carbon emissions, species extinctions, and the real tragedies that are occurring?

LB: Artists create visions. Before humans make something a reality, someone dreams up that reality. Art has tremendous ability to open windows to alternate worlds or ways of being. Think of the film *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013) and the shift toward no orcas at SeaWorld, or the song "Give Peace a Chance" (Plastic Ono Band, 1969) or Thoreau (2000) and the hippie and environmental movements. I think most, if not all, art has the potential to be activist. Poetry is no exception.

DC: Yes, action comes from activists, who are human beings with views, feelings, outlooks, and ingrained patterns of reaction and behaviour. I would add that the nature of our activism is shaped in large part by our conditioned patterns of thought and behaviour, how we exercise agency, how we understand the world we live in. If we are seduced by the illusion of our separateness and cast a host of characters in the role of villains, we might initiate conflicts and impose sanctions in the wrong places. We may exacerbate the very problem that spurs us to action. Poetry offers a way to question and challenge the self, a way of shifting our habitual modes of thought, a way to witness anew the internalized values and presuppositions that have been ensconced in our habits. If we do not attend to this aspect of activism, we risk reproducing and aggravating the internal turmoil that we have left unchecked.

LB: So poetry is a method toward "unity in variety." Science does the same. As the poet-scientist Bronowski (1956) wrote, "The discoveries of science, the works of art are explorations—more, are explosions, of a hidden likeness" (p. 19). We are constantly fighting this "illusion of separateness" that you spoke of; we separate ourselves from the rivers we pave over, the fossil fuels we extract, even a glance from another human. Thus, these others can be ignored and exploited. There's a reason that you'll rarely find a poem about divisiveness that actually *promotes* divisiveness. When you ponder on a topic carefully enough, steep in

understanding your subject's root of meaning (something poetry demands), you are offered an avenue toward tolerance and compassion.

DC: I've come across poetry that, although not expressly divisive, are distinctly political, and thus part of a field of social contestation. But I think that is poetry's merit. We don't bar poetic expression from any arena of human experience, conflict and division included. I don't think poetry *necessarily* steers us toward tolerance and compassion. For that, we need help from culture, ethics, education. Rather, the poetry can help us inhabit our divisions with some perspective and magnanimity; as T.S. Eliot once wrote, "we are united in the strife that divides us" (Eliot, 1993, p. 2168). To awaken from the illusion of separateness is not to collapse all distinctions, or to obviate diversity into one undifferentiated monad. Rather, it's the apprehension of the multifaceted, multi-layered, multi-dimensional faces of an unbroken cosmos. Unity in variety, as you put it. Even division and conflict are part of this unbroken whole.

LB: I love your poetic description of poetry. The unbroken whole, full of fractures, yet somehow still held together by tenuous filaments. Humans are the first species with the capacity to disrupt the whole of our planet. We now possess the power to bring down entire ecosystems, acidify the oceans, and deplete the ozone in the atmosphere that holds the upper limits of life. I'm not sure if our species is capable of the farsightedness needed to avoid the short-term destruction of the environment. To do this, we must shift out of the industrial-exploitative model, a wholesale change of the foundational systems of capitalist economy and consumerist culture, and consider the impact on generations to come.

DC: Here's another thought that I want to put out there, although it may seem too bleak for many to consider. Given that we are have already initiated a mass extinction event, introduced into the biosphere synthetic polymers that will not bio-decompose for tens of thousands of years, and created nuclear waste that will be radioactive into a very distant future, we now have to think about what environmental activism aims to achieve. Our actions are only a way to slow the bleeding, so to speak. Some say it is already too late to forestall environmental cataclysm. In this situation, we should consider the possibility that the positive outcomes of our activism will be limited, sometimes inconsequential. In this scenario, I submit that we have a responsibility to accept our pending demise as a species. This means learning to die with grace and humility.

LB: And poetry has a way of helping us die with grace and humility?

DC: Potentially. Poetry can help us live our fragility and mortality with greater care and tenderness. I don't think the beauty of poetry necessarily denies tragedy, but it might offer the transcendence of tragedy so that light might shine through the tragedy itself. If poetry is joyful, it is not because there is no more pain, but because the poem becomes the voice through which pain speaks anew. I like what Carl Leggo (2005) says about poetry: "I am not naively blind and deaf to all the clanging, glaring reasons that militate against hope in the world, but I am faithfully committed to composing possibilities for joy" (Leggo, 2005, p. 192). Poetry is the practice of composing joy, not because all will be well, but precisely because all is not well. It is defiance in the face of inevitability, a resilience that "laughs with indefatigable hopefulness" (Leggo, 2005, p. 191). And when we cultivate this indefatigability, we are able to continue the good work of environmental activism, from restoring wilderness to conserving species. It no longer matters whether these labours affect definitive outcomes; the work itself is worthy enough. We can commit to it regardless of what happens.

LB: So poetry can be a ray of hope on a bleak landscape?

DC: Yes, but by "hope" I don't mean to say that everything is made easier or better, as if hope comes to the rescue. I agree with Jane Hirshfield (1997) when she writes: "Hope is the hardest love we carry" (p. 39).

LB: My outlook is not as pessimistic as yours — or perhaps pragmatic is the better word — although I am called, at times, to write pessimistic poetry. Here's an example, inspired by walking dry riverbeds this past summer.

Dry River Run

This streamless stream holds
dreams of pollen
spores I catch on my tongue
sweet natal cells
once fluent with the cool sliver
of glacial current

Everything here runs smooth
  stones like eggs

polished by absent water
my soles pace this sandy cemetery

Nothing
here
runs
linear
the breeze rambles with memories—

take current from a river
and what remains?

In this ghostly stillness
I reminisce with the river—

dew drips
from a maple leaf vein
bacteria-bitten leaf
nibbled by dragonfly nymph
salmon fry snatches the wingless child
darts from kingfisher's flight
beyond the reach of a crayfish claw
into the mouth of bullfrog
who should not be here

bullfrog, you choke the cycle
in this place
sockeye hatch and die
bear hunger tosses them ashore
fish bones flood the soil
root thirst for phosphorus

maple grows once more

How long have you waited
for the mountaintops to melt
for the breath of rain

how quickly we bury
the current in the past

I cling to the lobed leaf
the water returns
memories etched
in
every
meander

DC: That's remarkable. I see it as both a love-song and a eulogy, which are both expressions of appreciation. When we love something, we cannot turn away from its demise. In this poem, you are acknowledging the river and mourning its disappearance. I think we are in dire need of this recognition of our collective environmental impact. This acknowledgement is the basic requirement of love. That is why I don't see myself a pessimist. I try, as Mathew Arnold wrote, to "[see] life steadily and [see] it whole" (Arnold, 1993, p. 1349). In my view, our love of the land requires that we not turn away from its degradation. Mourning is the other side of loving; refusal to mourn is refusal to love. There is no shortage of easy pleasures and quick distractions; a facile happiness is all too ubiquitous. We can prefer a plastic promise that all will be well, or look unflinchingly into the conflagration. Responsibility requires that we not turn away from what is right in front of us. This is why I cherish Jan Zwicky's (2016) words: "come, step closer to the edge, then/You must look, heart. You must look" (p. 8).

You've recently welcomed your second child into the world. How do you hold the view of our ecological situation with the hopefulness for your children?

LB: I wonder what my children will hold as their nature baseline. I grew up on Zero Avenue near White Rock, British Columbia, Canada. You could walk to the park, or forest, or ocean, all within five minutes. Today, the park has cut down all the trees I played in, the neighborhood forest is paved over, and the ocean is nearly inaccessible due to heightened US border measures and unwieldy Himalayan blackberry on the shoreline. Will this fractioned nature paradigm be their standard for a healthy environment? This is one of the reasons we moved to a Gulf Island, for a deeper immersion in nature.

That joy you spoke of is there, in their wide eyes and wondering gaze. We spend time outside, dig in the dirt, admire the ferns, witness the clearing of lots. I

need to show them the truth of the world, its tragedy and joy. If anything, I fight harder for ecological justice because I know my children will inherit this legacy.

DC: I think this honest look at both tragedy and joy can be part of our ongoing education. Attention to tragedy doesn't necessarily make us morose. I still laugh when I see my dog splayed out across the bed, and I lose my mind in the ruckus of a concert. Life is still a gift. But every moment of mirth is imbued with the recognition of frailty and ultimate impermanence. Frailty and ephemerality do not diminish beauty — they are inherently beautiful. I think of the most resplendent moments: a splattering of alto-cumulous cloud, a hummingbird rising from the brush, a writhing moon on the water's surface. They are exquisite precisely because they last but a moment. This is why I admire the Japanese poetic tradition, which boldly proclaims an aesthetic of tragic beauty, or what the Japanese call *mono no aware*"the natural poignancy in the beauty of temporal things" (Basho, 2000, p. xiv). Consider the following poem from Matsuo Basho:

> Lonely stillness
> A single cicada's cry
> Sinking into stone
> (Basho, 2000, p. 22)

The ease of expression is striking; the clarity of verse that intimates the evanescence of the wild. The poet conveys a majesty that is always dissipating. Pathos is never grasped apart from impermanence. I sense in Japanese poetry this deep love of the world, a devotion too sincere for affectation, an appreciation that can only dwell in the expressiveness of silence. This aesthetic tradition is a continuing source of inspiration for me. To live poetically in the Anthropocene is to give myself further to the wonder of this world in all its ephemerality, my own life included—and to live lightly, not holding on too tightly, as if to brush over rippled waters and the arching cedars like an autumn wind, embracing all and clinging to none.

LB: What a wonderful image. For those people who don't consider themselves poets or poetically inclined, how might they harness the power of poetry?

DC: In an age of great divisions and social strife, poetry itself can be a form of dialogue that operates on a different metaphor. In so far as "argument" and "debate" take the form of war (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), wherein I attack an opponent while defending my position, the mode of exchange is characterized by

aggression, where the stakes are claimed by a victor. This form of political and social exchange deepens division and stokes animosity. By contrast, a poetry circle does not play on adversarial instincts. The texture of dialogue, and the spirit of exchange is different. There is a tendency to share openly, and more importantly, to listen deeply. Poetry circles should not prohibit differences in views, even the most profound ones, but I believe that the fundamental metaphor of the circle is more conducive to relationship, understanding, and mutuality than the oppositional debates that we see in the media and other public forums. If people came together and wrote some poetry about what matters to them, and read their poems aloud to each other, we might have a more open, heartfelt, and vulnerable mode of exchange. We might listen to each other's words as an expression of humanity, not as claims to be discredited, or beliefs to be dismantled. Perhaps this is a mode of political exchange that can be explored further.

LB: This intentional dialogue bears similarity to the Circle Way process championed by Christina Baldwin (1998), and sharing circles practiced by many Aboriginal peoples. In this age of polarity, perhaps such circles can offer a productive way forward.

I would like to add that poetry can also be activist. As Faulkner and Cloud (2019) contend, "Poetic inquiry represents engaged social science" (p. xii) and "can be an active response to social issues, a political commentary, and a call to action" (p. x). In the newly published book, *Scientists and Poets #Resist* (Faulkner & England, 2020), there is a dialogue between poets and scientists. Every article and poem uses the seven words banned by the Trump administration for use in official documents for Health and Human Service: diversity, entitlement, vulnerable, transgender, fetus, evidence-based, and science-based. In fact, whenever these banned words appear in this book, they are printed in bold. This "collective aesthetic response" (p. xv) is an act of resistance and activism that attempts to reclaim what has been taken.

DC: I appreciate your thoughts and reflections. It's evident that in your poetry practice, you are following Mary Oliver's (2016) call "to observe with passion, to think with patience, to live always caringly" (p. 57).

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