

“Only Beauty Can Save the Planet”: Some Small Sidereal Considerations

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Preamble: “Turn Away From the Terror”



“Little Boy Blue”

Only beauty can save the planet. Let me explain. Even the strongest combination of guilty feelings, economic reasoning and scientific evidence are not enough to turn the tide so that our planet’s life may continue. Nevertheless – and here is where beauty comes in – if you love something, you want it to stay around and stay close, and keep radiantly well. And it is precisely beauty that makes you fall in love. [It] gives you the feeling that what is here is to be treasured and not misused or harmed, and certainly not to be regarded in terms of functional usefulness or economic return, for such is to look at the world as a slave or a whore. (James Hillman, 2006, p. 192)

Where is our comfort but in the free, uninvolved and finally mysterious beauty and grace of this world that we did not make, that has no price, that is not our work? Where is our sanity but here? Where is our pleasure but in working and resting kindly in the presence of this world? (Berry 2010, p. 21)

I am sick and tired of repeatedly finding myself answerable to voices and ghosts and actions whose only purpose is to exhaust me and make me vulnerable to their sales pitches, their political pitches, their distractions, panic-invocations, and the like. Here coined in a simple, terribly honest phrase from someone who profits selling education books to parents:

**Raising a Reader I:
Terror-memory prelude: I *Am* Reading...
Jodi Latremouille**

Kevin O’Leary is an affiliate of *The Learning Company*, a subsidiary of Houghton Mifflin, which publishes various popular “learn to read” series, such as Carmen Sandiego and Reader Rabbit. During an episode of the CBC series, “Dragon’s Den,” he said:

I’m all for children, but I want to make a buck... I *am* Reader Rabbit, I *am* Carmen Sandiego, I *am* Reader Rabbit. And this is what I do. People as you know, will do anything for their children to help them in math and reading scores. I made a fortune just servicing that market. I love the terror in a mother’s heart when she sees her child fall behind in reading. I profited from that. (Kevin O’Leary, 2012)

David Jardine reflects:

[T]his market logic does not work properly when one simply takes advantage of such terror and satisfies it. Such terror must be cultivated and maintained in just the right measure. Market economies are premised on the creation of dissatisfaction and the promise and semblance of just enough satisfaction to allow dissatisfaction to re-emerge once the promise is forgotten. (David Jardine, 2016, p. 162)

(Jodi Latremouille, in Latremouille, Tait & Jardine, 2024, p. 196)

Don’t mistake Wendell Berry’s phrase, above, “Where is our comfort...?” for some groggy, self-satisfying laze. The word has old, wise kin. It means common fortitude, strength together, strength found elsewhere that in the deliberate shell-shocking fakeries that turn out to be fake. With each other, here, writing, reading, and with Ravens as well, wanting to help our keeps be well. Wanting the work to be real, to be tough and long and drawn out in its demands. It is not as if we have not been long-since warned from multiple directions all at once:

People whose governing habit is the relinquishment of power, competence and responsibility, and whose characteristic suffering is the anxiety of futility, make excellent spenders. They are the ideal consumers. By inducing in them little panics of boredom, powerlessness, sexual failure, mortality, paranoia, they can be made to buy virtually anything that is ‘attractively packaged’. (Berry 1986, p. 24)

The old trick. An old switch that is needed. Peruse William Leach’s *Land of Desire* (1994) – the gearing of attention towards consumption. The gearing of production and consumption to the

satisfying of desires. The complicit *stimulating of desires* in order to maintain the profitability of those promising the satisfaction of such desires that they themselves help create. What gets offered as a satisfaction of our franticness and panics is geared precisely towards both *appearing to satisfy* whilst at once *maintaining* our unease which it then *promises*, again and again, to ameliorate.

In this spin, things become monstrous, overwhelming, and deliberately so. Here be some companions sought out and cited to help us along this way:

[This is] what Edward Said calls the “vocabulary of giantism and apocalypse, each use of which is plainly designed not to edify but to inflame” (Said 2001, p. 4). Ivan Illich (with Cayley 1992) almost playfully names the inflaming and exaggerating urge in these matters a sort of “apocalyptic randiness”—basically framed, “I have an even more horrible example to tell you! Let’s imagine an even worse situation ...!” (p. 127). (Jardine, 2012, pp. 27-28)

Here’s a glimpse of what is rattling me lately. We’ve got students on schoolboard steps with protest signs that read “Why Study for a Future We Won’t Have?” (CBC News, 2019; Jardine, 2024). An old reprimand still serves me well to remember in the face of all this:

It is impossible to divorce the question of what we do from the question of where we are—or, rather, where we think we are. That no sane creature befouls its own nest is accepted as generally true. What we conceive to be our nest, and where we think it is, are therefore questions of the greatest importance. (Berry, 1986, p. 51)

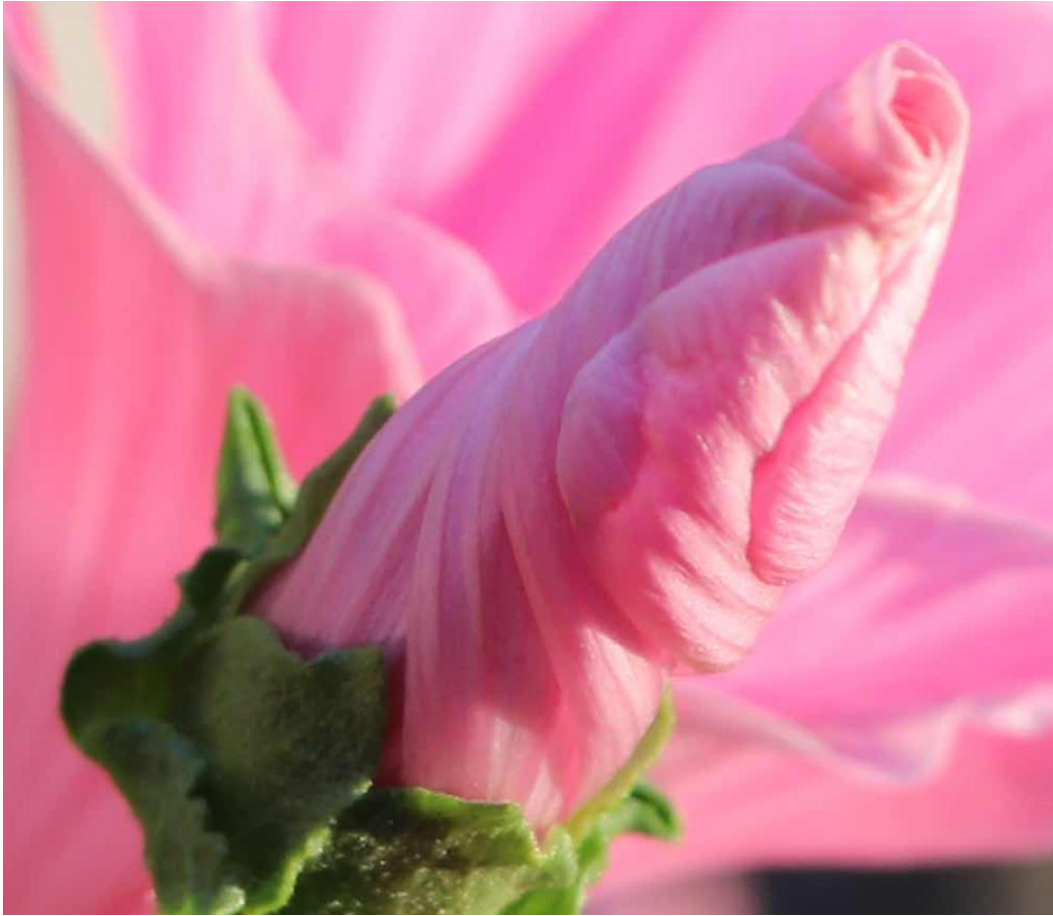
If we are led to believe that we are actually living in the middle of the tumult of distractions, diversions, exhaustions, then there is no nest to befoul and nothing that befouls it. It is all scattershots all the way down the line. And therefore, there is nothing else to do other than get swept away. This is already a clue to our circumstances, not that we have become unnested, but that we have been spellbound—schools, teachers, students, parents, grandparents, even ecopedagogical activists.

My dear brother David G. Smith pointed out to me that, if we get caught in an equal but opposite overwhelmed, titanic state, “catastrophism becomes the perfect after-play” (Jardine, 2019, pp. 77-87). Another old friend counselled a student years ago – the door is open. Turn away from the spellbandedness. Walk out into the open. Encounter the flesh of things. Write a bit, or paint if you’re able. Try to provide alluring hushes beyond the noise. Make beautiful open doors that others might find. Do what you can to help beauty save attention from its distractions.

I do what I can. I photograph and write. And I adore students on steps with signs. What I have is the experience and strength to do is not everyone’s cup of tea.

What follows is a series of considerations. Hopefully you can pardon my old writer’s head, when I point out that *even this word* hides a sense of being out under the embrace and guidance of the stars. Don’t get woozy. If you don’t pay careful attention, the cougars will rip your flesh open and bleed you out and start eating you before your dead. I carried the near-corpse of one of my lovely dogs down our hill, skin hanging. I still murmur over knowing, trying to know, that nothing had gone wrong.

Simply as that.

First Consideration: “Beauty Arrests Motion”***“A Small Ode to Georgia O’Keefe”***

The familiar idea [is] that beauty arrests motion. You draw in your breath and stop still. This little gasp – *hshshs* as the Japanese draw between their teeth when they see something beautiful in a garden – this *ahhhhh* reaction is the aesthetic response just as certain, inevitable, objective and ubiquitous as a wincing in pain and moaning in pleasure. Moreover, this quick intake of breath is also the very root of the work aesthetics, *aisthesis* in Greek, meaning sense-perception. *Aisthesis* goes back to the Homeric *aiou* and *aisthou* which means both “I perceive” as well as “I gasp, struggle for breath,” as in *aisthomai*, I breathe in. Does this not suggest that if beauty is to appear, we must be stopped still? (Hillman, 2006, p. 183)

An old, former-asthmatic like me can’t resist this cluster of paths – breath, stopped, started, drawn in fast and then big breaths down to slowdowns. Lavatera, sunlight, brightness, the bees encircling, garden, Eastern Slopes of the Rocky Mountains, 4200 ft. elevation, and the Ravens, and the red squirrels and cougars and deer – exactly how long would this list need to be to be adequate to the fullness of what is nested in that flower, in my attention to it, in photographing it, in placing it here, in you seeing it?

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The lines of venture and exploration and study and writing and reading and revisiting and on and on are inexhaustible and therefore, to try to write something about it must try to somehow offer something of that inexhaustibility to a reader as being in the nature of the thing itself. It is all that wealth and rain and wait and dying at season's end.

There is no coincidence, then, that so many of the disciplines many of us have sought out in these "ecologically sorrowful times" (Jardine, 2015, in press; See Dereby, 2015) involve trying to catch our breath and settle, and give up the screaming and panics that arise.

It is also no coincidence that when the suggestion of inquiries that are open into living fields of relations, living, cascading disciplines of knowledge, it feels too much like all hell breaking loose, all over again in an efficient and tightly-measured classroom or school or school board:

Education becomes akin to a sometimes overt, but more often subtle, war on the very possibility of unanticipated "uprising." Free spaces and those who cultivate them become suspect. Natality becomes experienced as a perennial insurgent threat to security that must be planned for and secured against. Education becomes cast as akin to a counterinsurgent war on terror—a perpetual war (Postel & Drury, 2003), given the perpetuity of the world's mortality. After all, a war against our response ("terror") to the very existence of uprising is, of necessity, perpetual. It is also profoundly Thantic—a longing for the end of this roil, for finality, fixity and death, but I'll leave this thread loose for now and for others to follow. (Jardine, 2012, p. 5)

Thanatos, the Greek god of death.

Second Consideration: *Strix Varia*

It is also no coincidence that such capture and release provides a dear and fragile focus for composing something while, at the same time, trying to compose myself and not just get caught up again in the deliberately manipulated and aggravate heats and fakes.

One way that I do this is to write a paragraph like the one above and let it become a summons for old bloodlines and ancestral assurances that this is not simply me courting lightheaded-ness or poetic airy-ness, but rather having spotted something and having been spotted by it all in one gesture. Like this. In translation, from 1406, Tibet, Tsong-kha-pa, from a three volume text portentously titled *The great treatise on the stages of the path to enlightenment (Lam rim chen mo)* (2000, 2002, 2004).

I compose this in order to condition my own mind (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 111).

Having spotted and having been spotted. Yes. An old referentiality clustered with interdependencies and relations. Thus then linked up, later on the day of citing this, with this out front of the house:



“Having Spotted and Having Been Spotted”

Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas IV (David Jardine)

These are, in part, great fading arts of taxonomic attention, and the deep childly pleasures to be had in sorting and gathering and collecting (See Paul Shepard, 1998). There is something about such gathering that is deeply personal, deeply formative, deeply pedagogical. As I slowly gathered something of this place, it became clear that I was also somehow “gathering myself.” And as I gathered something of the compositions of this place, I, too, had to become composed in and by such gathering. (Jardine 2024a, in Latremouille, Tait & Jardine, 2024, p. 96)

A Barred Owl. *Strix varia*. Varied stripes. Also, Strix is a deep well of old Greek myths of a wide myriad. Stories ready to tell, ready to ask why they might have been written. Owls, as portends of one's death. Owls as harbingers of wisdom. And, of course, the oxygens from those lodgepole pines make up its very being, as to the voles and small squirrels blood-stained on the branches.

Like the lavatera, with proper attention, it becomes "radiant" as does my own desire to keep it "radiantly well," and send this photo to the 2 ½ year old.

"A holding back, a keeping clear" of that which might distract the growing affection, the growing knowing of its ways and of my own lot in the face of its stare.

And the ironies of a long career spent in schools: "This is from Greek *skholē* ... leisure, rest, ease; ... originally 'a holding back, a keeping clear'" (online etymological dictionary, under "school" (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=school>)).

There is something so simple about this, about offering our attention to rich and living fields of relations such that my own "restlessness becomes irrelevant" (Trungpa, 2003, p. 218). Such be not only the ecopedagogy of this sighting, but also a glimpse of it as a site of commiseration and encouragement, of venture, of composition and my own composure.

This nest of relations I hope to not befoul. There is enough here to study – trees, Rocky Mountain slopes, habitats, snowfalls, averages, runoffs, migratory routes, maps, the mathematics of charts and reading them well, old stories indigenous to this place, histories – for those caught up in the fragmentary flurries of one-damn-thing-after-another, each bent to *prevent* stopping over any one bit, how much luxuriousness would be enough to break your gaze?

My grandson and I have learned to recognize its hoots, to know that that is a lodgepole pine tree on which it is sitting, to love the Barred Owl painting by Anita McComas (www.anitamccomas.com) that graces the cover of the book cited above. My grandson and I talk of the patience needed to happen upon an owl. We've talked, too, of the patience needed to plant pea seeds (in the next couple of weeks) and then, well, *wait*, and learn the lesson that our adorable urgency to taste them need pedagogical care – *they* take time and attention and care, a "continuity of attention and devotion" (Berry, 1986, p. 33), and that patience is tough, it is lovely, and it is shared. It is one well-known broadly-known, and we can take comfort in each other's waits and whiles.

I have to add an old story here. My next-door neighbour, Eva Mundy way back in the early 1950s, planted peas in her garden, Burlington, Ontario. My mother told a tale of Eva coming for the daily morning coffee and saying that she didn't know what was wrong with those peas she planted. "They keep popping up out of the ground I planted them in, so I keep having to push them back in."

Third Consideration: “Nothing New Under the Sun”

An aesthetic response to particulars would radically slow us down. To notice each event would limit our appetite for events, and this very slowing down of consumption would affect inflations, hyper-growth, the manic defenses and expansionism of civilization. Perhaps events speed up into proportion to their not being appreciated; perhaps events grow to cataclysmic size and intensity in proportion to their not being noticed. (Hillman, 2006, p. 41)

To notice the fullness of each event would slow us down, but each event often seems bereft of all its relations. A mere detached fragment. Such is the long, well-documented history of efficiency-based fragmentation in contemporary schooling. Stopping over anything seems not only impossible but unnecessary, because severed and separated particulars have lost their radiance.

Better, perhaps, our individual and collective memory of how to linger over things so that they show their radiance has atrophied. This is certainly true of how many classrooms have operated. In fact lingering over things has become, in some quarters, an object of mockery. There is nothing new about this, so take heart. I feel in good company under such mockery.

A reiteration. If we are led to believe that we are actually living in the middle of the tumult of distractions, diversions, exhaustions, then there is no nest to befoul and nothing that befouls it. It is all scattershots all the way down the line. And therefore, there is nothing else to do other than get swept away. This is already a clue to our circumstances, not that we have become unnested, but that we have been spellbound—schools, teachers, students, parents, grandparents, even ecopedagogical activists.

We have become spellbound on purpose.

And then this, in case I get too spellbound by the semblances of newness:



“This image, sent to us by Techdirt reader techinabox [<https://www.techdirt.com/user/techinabox/>] shows that not much has changed over the last 100 years.”

(Tim Cushing, 2014, from an online article entitled ‘Technology Doesn’t Make Us Less Social; It Just Changes the Way We Socialize’).

Fourth Consideration: “Really Clear Politics”

Well, a certain cat is out of the bag. One of the pitiful realities of being a retired academic is that looking oneself up (looking up oneself?) on Google Scholar, Academia.edu and yes, even checking one’s books on amazon.ca (I’m Canadian, eh?), is (I sincerely hope! Oh dear) a commonplace practice. Academic writing, especially specialized things with a small orbit, is the sort of thing that easily disappears into the world with little trace. In the old days, one had to wait for the Social Sciences Citation Index to be published and then one had to scuffle over to the library and breathe in the air of dead tree leafing and crammed study.

Now, of course, things have changed. So, after a session of, frankly, checking whether certain of my own books are still in print *at all*, I moved over to realclearpolitics.com to get a glimpse of the slow-moving trains of American political matters. Charts and graphs.

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Streaming down and around the charts were ads for my own books.

Now, I'd only be betraying my age if I were to say that I was surprised by this.

I was surprised by this, and this even though, a few days back, ads for chlorine tablets for my dissolved-hydrogen-sulfide-well-water-system were showing up, having been searched for the previous day. And the utter silence about this, whatever "this" is, in the train wreck movement of politics, real or otherwise, is deafening.

The weary candidates' choices and the requisite statistics and charts and graphs are just a carrier for the "real clear" message. Interest in politics as a *means* for increased and increasingly targeted marketing. Ads only *appearing to be* on the margins of the webpage.

The best selfie ever, no? The one thing that hit me hardest is this: this is my first visceral experience of what has been called "living in a bubble" or "living in an echo-chamber," vis-a-vis contemporary media choices, news-outlet choices, market economics, political self-containments, social insiders and outsiders, and the like. Just what to do about realizing this is up in the cold air. I was being marketed to myself, inside of an ideologically isolated and self-confirming online world of relations bent on profiting from my very own online moves. Daresay, "of course," but it was still a jarring moment. Strangely enough, the very act of self-enclosed marketing strategies showed itself, in all its glory, to be precisely a breach of the very echo-chamber it was (falsely) deemed to ensure.

An example of a contemporary horror-movie trope: the call is coming from inside the house. I can hear it whispering as it pulls its black cowl open:

"Wanna buy a book?"

Second Last Consideration: "Meditate on This"

Whilst drifting along again with MSNBC's evening line-up of repeated, repeated, repeated, repeated news of the latest self-involved offenses, I noticed that there was *yet another* TV-on-mute advertisement for *yet another* new brand of bed. This, I believe, might be the fifth different bed brand advertised in recent months and the ads are repeated over and over, day after day. It is, of course, annoying and boring, funny and a commonplace, look-at-that outrage, but there is one phrase that a woman in one ad uses that is both quite silly and quite unintentionally telling:

"I'm all about my bed."

It always takes time to figure the tell, to see the omen. So many advertisers have chosen the screeches of evening online news as the appropriate locale to say, hush, hush, despite all this, despite all this, despite all this, sleep, sleep, sound in the knowledge of dreams, deep nuzzle in the fending off of scenes and sounds of endless, repeated catastrophes. (Jardine 2019, p. 96)

You lose great purpose when you are distracted in idle chatter and amusement which are the source of much pointless suffering. Meditate on this. (Tsong-kha-pa, 2004, p. 187)

I was blocked out of my university email over the weekend. Ineptitude on my part. Two and a half days, and, this morning, it took 5 minutes on the phone with IT to fix things. Once I got back into that email, the only messages were ones about attempts of mine to get into that email. An old George Carlin joke about cocaine, that it makes you feel like a new man. Trouble is that the new guy wants some as well.

Meanwhile, I recall Eva saying that she had to continually pick the flower off her tomato plants.

She didn't want *flowers*.

I love her still and those fleets of memory serve. My grandson is on his way over to pot-up tomato seedlings this morning. Planted for a future we hope we will have, of ripening.

One Last Consideration for Now



“Burned Out Nonet Plus One”

To glimpse the backrapture of the colour
The intense of us all standing there. Trees arrayed. White sky.
Bidped. Our shared heat and miracle. Our exaggerated desire
To focus on these
Nine Great Multiple Heads. Plus one Old Head. Us all
Sunflowering.
Turned. Rapt.

There is no measure that can “save the planet,” or ensure a future that we will have. There are measures that we can stand in the presence of and that can provide commiseration and encouragement. I’ve had the great luxury of a comfortable life, of cascading grandchildren, of gardens and writing. But I have also cultivated these prospects, worked on them, cared for them, given my breath to them.

Only beauty can save a life because it draws me close to do what I’m able. All praise to those who can help the other threads in this mixture we’re in. All praise to students standing on the steps of a school board office.

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