

DEEP IN ADMIRATION

Ursula K. Le Guin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The seventeenth-century Christian mystic Henry Vaughan wrote:

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

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

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

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

INFINITIVE

We make too much history.

With or without us
there will be the silence
and the rocks and the far shining.
But what we need to be
is, oh, the small talk of swallows
in evening over
dull water under willows.

To be we need to know the river
holds the salmon and the ocean
holds the whales as lightly
as the body holds the soul
in the present tense, in the present tense.