

If We Pay Attention, Might We Yet Know What to Do?

An essay touching on the power of poetry as a form of religious expression recently reminded me of a guest column I had just read in the H-T on the looming ecological crisis and the likelihood of a coming mass extinction.

Simultaneously, words written by Jim Morrison and sung by the rock band, The Doors, came to mind. Composed after the break-up of a love affair, Morrison frequently revised his lyrics and came to regard them as universal, complex, and (apparently) enigmatic in meaning. Some of the lines evolved to the following:

This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end

Of our elaborate plans, the end
Of everything that stands, the end

.....

Lost in a Roman wilderness of pain
And all the children are insane
All the children are insane
Waiting for the summer rain, yeah

This is the end
Beautiful friend
This is the end
My only friend, the end

Somehow these lyrics seemed evocative not just of the end of a love affair, but the end of all love affairs: a requiem for our fading time of flourishing on this planet. Have we possibly come to that?

I'm not optimistic, but I still hold out hope that people will come to their senses, governments will undertake heroic measures to fight climate change, and some semblance of human life worth living will survive the devastations of global warming.

But will people stop eating beef and minimize other animal consumption? Will they limit their travel and consume only necessities? Will they reuse or recycle everything they do not consume? Will they convert to solar, wind, and geothermal energy? Will they re-forest deforested lands? Will they adapt to economies driven by need, not preference, sustainability, not convenience, essentials, not frills, equitable distribution, not competition? Am I willing to do these things for the sake of those who are already suffering and those coming after me? Will governments and militias lay down their arms so that fossil-fuel consuming and habitat-destroying weapons of war are never again deployed?

It will take most if not all of these measures and more to keep our planet habitable for ourselves, not to mention other species. Military-industrial complexes will have to be dissolved. Economies premised on continuous expansion will have to be repudiated, or so thoroughly reconceived, that sheer material production is no longer a measure of growth. A higher standard of living will have to be understood as a better, more creative, less consumption-oriented way of existence that appreciates and cares for the earth and all its inhabitants.

In her poem, “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver meditated on a grasshopper that alighted on her hand. Observing its behavior, and wondering, “Who made the world?”— and this grasshopper — she continued,

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

What is it you plan to do with the life that is still yours? And with this planet, now still teeming with life? Is this the end, my friend? Or is it yet possible to write another chapter? At least be thankful for what has been and is — never taking anything for granted.

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