

Letter to Bill Thompson

July 10, 2011

Dear Bill,

When I was telling you about the strategy I came up with to keep from being crushed by the ever-present conviction that humans are going to hell in a hand basket and taking a big chunk of the planet with them, I left out something important.

For a long time I've been grieving human nature—our stupidity, greed, selfishness, cruelty, lack of self-awareness, and laughable arrogance. I'm human and I'm guilty. I'm ashamed and I'm profoundly sad. Sadness, guilt, and shame were suffocating me. As I told you at the potluck, my first way of consoling myself was by telling myself that I'm not as bad as some. I limit my carbon foot print; I'm engaged in right livelihood. I exert my small influence even while believing it won't ultimately change the course we're on. (I can see no other way to live than *as if* I have hope.)

The part I left out—and this is what really makes a difference for me—is that I'm transcendent. I'm human and I'm more than human. My dreams and visions—concrete, empirical evidence—tell me that my body and soul share in the body and soul of all nature, the planet, the universe, and beyond. As such, I (and all humans) share in the macrocosmic, continuous cycle of birth and death and rebirth and on and on. I transcend the limited human concept of space and time, measured by my confined and mortal body. I was shocked by the instant, deeply transformative effect of this epiphany. It revived my soul, changed the climate inside my brain, and freed me to find joy again. Maybe that's an indication of how desperate I was and how the human will to live can wrap itself around any credible support.

Each of us contains the seeds of our own destruction. I suspect this is true for every animate and inanimate thing. Humans are just now glimpsing their own mortality. What a transformation that wreaks in itself! What a leap of enlightenment!

There is a post script to this. When I lived in Portland, I was commissioned to write a history of the Portland Police Bureau. In order to get ready for this, I read up on the history of the city. Based on that history, you would think that Portland couldn't possibly exist today. Its whole recorded past is a litany of meanness, violence, and corruption. And yet there Portland is—one of the most habitable,

green, people-friendly cities in the country. Obviously there were forces at work that went largely unnoticed by the historians. Constructive forces are like that—they're quieter and less obtrusive. Destructive forces, on the other hand, are by their nature in-your-face and demanding of attention. So I think it's possible that the constructive forces aren't as obvious to me and maybe will be more successful than I think. My ninety-three-year-old friend and mentor, Richard Johnston (a historian) shares my pessimism about the human race. But he also believes in the resilience of people. He thinks we may pull through without the complete obliteration of human civilization and the extinction of the race—but not without a lot of unnecessary suffering. I guess that's a glimmer of hope.

Be well,

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