Letters from Amok: The State of the World in Pen and Ink

Contributed by Chellis Glendinning
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I stand in the Chimayó, New Mexico, post office, poring over a hand-scrawled note from Oakland immigrant-rights activist Arnoldo Garcia -- and I weep. Not for the stark vision of the fragility of life and the forces ripping into it that he voices, for I am not unfamiliar with the dire state of the world -- but for the fact that he has had the courage to state it with so much heart.

Dear Chellis,

I'm still plugging away in the struggle for deep justice, writing poetry every chance I get, and relearning hope.
I finally took a sabbatical from the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights. From this slight distance I'd say that it's a tough situation we're in. Have we reached a plateau? Or are we in decline? Don't know that the Big-We-Collective, or even a significant constellation of them/us, has learned the difference. I'm worried about the safety and well-being of my family, extended families, and those like you who make a difference. In the immigrant justice movement there's a lot of thoughtless trading of rights. The challenge is getting a majority to turn together. But that majority is up for definition.

Every revolution has kept us farther away from the natural world and our roots. And the Earth herself will always have the last say. I remember a speaker at the International Survival Gathering in the Black Hills saying that for America to live, Europe had to die. Too few of us understood the metaphor.

--Arnoldo Garcia, c/s ["con safo": Chicano sign-off]

Oakland, California

The next day I receive another letter. This one is from my compañero in Bolivia: Appalachian folksinger Jack Herranen. My God! From a village far away on the southern altiplano, Jack is feeling the same need to express the frailty of our lives and planet.

Hermana Che! Mi querida prima en la lucha!

I have re-approached the piece you wrote with your Chilean comrade Jesús Sepúlveda ("In Service to the Deities," Sacred Fire, Winter 2009). In it you refer to our mission as being "in service to the deities." Your words help ground me back to the reality of my life here in the village. Oftentimes the knowing slips -- and I find myself bivouacking on an outcropping of the slippery slope to modernity.

I have here the works of Wendell Berry by my side, James Baldwin's Nobody Knows My Name, fresh coca from La Paz, some quotes from Illich and Mumford within eyeshot -- also a makeshift altar on the kitchen sill with a folk image of Hank Williams, Sr., an amulet of La PachaMama, and some Palo Santo wood for cleansing. I have no commitments 'til tomorrow … other than to be in service to the deities.

The passing away of Valentina's sister [who had been ill since being tortured in Chile in the 1980s] stirred up grief and dark memories. I appreciate a point in the piece you did with Jesús where you identify the interrelatedness of your excruciating trauma wrought from within (the family) and Jesus' trauma doled out from without (the state). They are, of course, inextricably linked. One could even say that in the Northern hemisphere, there is a private Guerra Limpia underway. The surface is kept polished, obsessively, but meanwhile comes the steady decaying within – and never a proper collective historical atonement. It gets harder and harder to do so with every passing year, and it's not a stretch to say that it is now too late. Varying forms of amnesia, denial, and subsequent collective neuroses – madness -- have taken root.

I recall Charles Bowden's take in Blood Orchids. He imagines North America as a patient on a stretcher with a white sheet laid across her, and blood stains blossoming all across it, rising up thicker in certain areas.

The patient is still on the stretcher and those blossoms of blood still appear in new and more troubling ways. It seems so….so…offensive -- the ways in which the dogmatic left-right blather drives critical conversation farther out to the margins … at a time when the well-being of so many souls is at stake!

As Haiti moans, as my dear southern hills are destroyed, as suffocating blankets of new technology are laid across the lands affecting all and sundry, as more and more salt is thrown into the gaping wounds of the Middle East, as denigration and violence grow stronger and tear apart our communities -- every day it is as if there is a foul creature banging on our door, drooling, mocking all acts of tenderness.

--Jack Herranen

Totorkawa, Bolivia

Come the following day, I begin to get the feeling that the Chimayó post office has strung a direct line to the collective psyche: a letter arrives from Michigan ecologist Stephanie Mills, and it too addresses the precariousness of earthly life.

Dear Chellis,

This morning I am pondering.

Last summer brought an unnerving irruption of Eastern tent caterpillars. Their silky pouch nests were everywhere in the crotches of the cherry trees, and the creatures themselves stripped the limbs bare. Which is what they do, and the trees can usually withstand it – but not repeatedly and not in droughts. As spring unfolds, we'll see if these members of the biotic community can make it through the current distress.

All of our gravest problems -- overpopulation, climate destabilization, depletion of non-renewable resources, water scarcity, and the extinction crisis – are the predictable outcomes of the going economic paradigm, the trajectory of civilization. And those mega-problems come to a backyard focus in even the hardiest members of the local sylva on the ropes.

Personally, I'm reckoning on being doomed, along with the other folks who didn't complete an advanced degree at Outward Bound or John Brown's Tracker School. A feeling of impending doom is a symptom of various kinds of mental illness, correct? But what does psychiatric diagnosis make of us who believe such a feeling to be rational and fact-based?

--Stephanie Mills

Maple City, Michigan

Then, on the fourth day -- as if right on beat -- a hand-written letter from Chilean poet Jesús Sepúlveda, in Oregon, is waiting in my post box, and he has actually titled his missive "Inmensa Precariedad."

Querida Che,

Poet Paul Dresman came to visit with us yesterday. He was back from Mexico where it rained for three solid days and flooded the whole country. The Mexican rainy season is May-October, not now. Something is fundamentally wrong, and the agents that humans produce -- industrialism, mega-technologies, mass societies, wars – are the culprits.

A climatologist told Paul that, like a sip of water for a fever, the planet is cooling itself down with moisture to tend the

global warming. Lovelock's Theory of Gaia is proven: the planet is reacting against human industrial activity.

So, it's not a slogan to say that civilization is sickening the planet's soil through monoculture and polluting the air and oceans through industrial waste, fossil fuels, atomic radioactivity, and CO2 emissions. The ozone has been slimmed -- while the Arctic and the Antarctic are melting. The so-called world leaders don't agree on basic measures, and their minds seem to be on keeping their political power, making profitable business, and playing their pitiful ego games.

So, when I write that there is a sense of inmensa precariedad, querida Che, it is not a metaphor: it's a sad feeling.

--Jesús Sepúlveda

Eugene, Oregon

Suddenly, it seems, many are giving voice to the unspeakable: things have gone awry, run amok, landed in the proverbial hand basket.

I value the authentic, the real -- the truth. But, I wonder. Could it be that the truth is passing beyond the human capacity to take in?

I am reminded of Dr. Robert Jay Lifton's descriptions in Death in Life of the numbed-out daze of the survivors, stepping over bruised and blackened bodies like ghosts themselves, as they walked aimlessly around Hiroshima – all the while ensconced in a cloud of radiation. I seem to recognize these same phantoms today as people, stepping over the bodies of the homeless, walk aimlessly, or run as if in flight, necks crooked around mobile phones, shouting at nobody, poking at thin metal pads – all the while in a soup of radiation.

The way out of the encroaching psychic stranglehold, my correspondents are writing, will not come via belief in being saved by the can-do, big-system management of an Obama or a Marine Corps or a Verizon -- but , first and only, by admitting the truth.

All our senses, our air, waters, land, waves, and spaces are under assault. Privatizations and deprivations, private and deprived ownership of everything. In the neighborhood one of my family members narrowly escaped being shot with a rifle. Seven teens have been killed by other teens, all in a 25-block radius of my home. Schwarzenegger and the California Assembly passed a budget that will strangle our public schools and push youth over a precipice of hopelessness and violence. My political daily work with immigrants doesn't make sense in this upside-down world, and my own hands are soiled from having worked in industrial agriculture, poisoned, losing my senses.

--Arnoldo, c/s

I drove to The Farm in Tennessee, still extant after forty years. It's pretty land, gently hilly with oak-hickory woodlands. Midwifery is still a big deal, drawing trainees from all over the world and mothers who want to give birth there. It's still a place fomenting good works, where pioneers are aging upright, and their children are returning, but it no longer has a communal economy. The land is collectively owned, but home sites are private. Everyone has to have paid, mostly offsite employment if they are to survive, and "cost effectiveness" has become a major part of The Farm's vocabulary.

It's striking that, in the space of twenty years, 1,500 healthy young Americans, many with inheritances and trust funds, were unable collectively to achieve subsistence for themselves. Part of what brought them down was a move by the banks to squeeze them on their debts, medical debts large among them, accrued at Vanderbilt University Medical Center treating birth complications.

This makes me cautious about proposing new societies, new communities, planned utopias of any sort. In this world creating community has become a bit like putting Humpty Dumpty back together again.

--Steph

As with any awakening, the act of confession may chink a thin crack, then a rough gap and finally a blazing hole, in the psychic armor. I tingle with expectancy as I read the letters, sensing perhaps that I am witnessing something unexpected unfolding through the words: the emergence of something that -- despite all -- gyrates with the original and inborn modes of human capability: the graspable, the face-to-face, the relational.

The unpredictable.

I wrote before that it is too late. I rather mean to say that it is too late for universal solutions crafted by leaders who adhere to nation-states, development projects, and military technology.

As some would say, that is not enough. This fellow that you may know, Derrick Jensen, has unleashed a torrent of words damning industrial civilization. Justly so. I have reveled in his sobering truths and anger.

But there is not, in the industrialized global North, enough of a communal tapestry to support a popular uprising against industrial civilization and tear it down. So why write another 500-page book making people feel unsettled about this fact!?! Doesn't it make more sense to tend to the tapestries of relationships around us, identify the acts of vernacular dignity still alive, and generously, lovingly, tend them?

Maybe if we do engage on this risky, raw, heartfelt level, shifts may take place. Illusory ideas of advancing towards universal progress and "First World" development goals might begin to crumble. Maybe the pillars of injustice that Dr. King identified -- racism, militarism, materialism -- might begin to topple.

The revolution Jensen calls for might have worked a half century ago, before the development of the new sinister technologies for crowd control and national "security." Try to surround the Pentagon now and ya' might end up encased in a concretizing blob of foam or trembling down on the ground in the fetal position as your blood begins to boil, eardrums blown out, shitting yourself!

Mind you, I still reflect back upon Howard Zinn's notion of the "coming revolt of the guards" -- and pray to the deities for such a moment.

But it seems more and more unlikely.

--Jack

Gurdjieff believed that human beings are the sense organs of the Earth. Shamans from the Mexican lineage of Nagualism say the universe itself becomes self-aware through our consciousness. My experience tells me that crises help to grow, expand horizons, awaken. I don't expect mass society to be redeemed. I don't expect that mass leaders would revolutionize industrialism or come out with a global governmental platform.

But I expect that an important number of humans may reunify us with Gaia consciousness. Such is not esotericism. It's common sense in traditional cultures and pragmatic knowledge in indigenous communities. It's empirical practice among shamans.

Waking up would take diverse routes: political action, artistic creation, writing, singing, gardening, use of plants of power, camping in wild areas, experiencing human nature.

I have no agenda.

--Jesús

Sight, smell, hearing, pain, joy, urge, motion – these are the favored terrains of my pen-wielding comrades. Breaking through the numbed-out daze global society insists upon becomes a journey into mindfulness of the senses, they are proposing.

Indeed, the sensate and the sensual are the identical realms practitioners in the field of trauma recovery are looking to for guidance. Deep down, the body and the psyche know how to heal, they are finding. Similarly, is it possible that people all across this beleaguered planet know how to re-inhabit life?

We have to be capable of everything to stop the irrationality! We must use all our senses to move in any direction other than the one in the driver's seat. Many thoughts, theories, practices, and ways of being must wither in our bodies before we go, from ones and twos in our communities, to saying "No" to the current arrangements that make it easier for young men to get guns than books, to be martyrs without a cause.

--Arnoldo, c/s

Behind the precariousness, there is the immensity of life — Gaia, the blue astral body! We are our bodies, our senses, our creature-selves, animals with feelings, minds, and will.

I told Paul Dresman, when he was here, about Leonardo Boff, the Brazilian thinker whose perspective on the noosphere [collective human consciousness] is like a fresh-water lake in this near-apocalyptic world. We have created this scenario: we let the technosphere take over and mediate our will, hearts, and minds, accepting an illusion as reality. Instead of searching for happiness, too many humans have looked for importance.

But when we feel ourselves in the moment, we become real again.

--Jesús

I have my guitar here. It continues to be a rowboat leading me into side inlets and back bays of regeneration. It is not too late to become a criador, a nurturer; to hold core values sacred and central; to put them into daily practice. I hungrily seek out the moments of care, nurturance, tenderness, compassion, creativity. They are there! I know it. I feel it. I value, defend, and cultivate them. As my compa Kenneth Patchen wrote:

Gentle and giving

The rest is nonsense and treason.
--Jack

There's some kind of bird gathering going on around my studio. Several individuals of a species I don't recognize are darting through the open air, chatting up a storm, swooping wildly up and over the roof.

Unsettled weather here. It's been a colder winter than usual, freeze levels almost like the glaciers that passed through here millennia ago. It's breezy now too, giving the pines their voices, causing branches to dapple the sunlight.

I'll be writing about biodiversity for the Post-Carbon Institute's roadmap to transition anthology. Peak Nature: a tough subject. Preserving bugs and bears may be more difficult when everybody is hungry and would just as soon eat a whale as save one … Such a strange time to be alive. It feels like an immense psycho-spiritual challenge to govern the wayward mind and direct its attention forward. Or better, place it in the moment.

Whatever these birds are, the fact that I can't identify them is kind of wonderful. They're new to me. Maybe they're here for the first time because the climate is new and spring is different now. It's the moment we've all got to inhabit. Life still wants to be lived!

--Steph

A notion of personal/political non-compliance is reiterated in these missives I pore over and then, as if craving their truth-telling, clutch in my hand. I am right there with it.

Indeed, the most widespread people's effort on the planet since World War II has been secession -- from the mass systems created over centuries of exploration, seizure, and exploitation that ultimately resulted in the global empires and mega-societies of the modern era. As a result of the independence movements sweeping the globe, the United Nations grew from 51 members in 1945 to 192 members today -- and all the while the number of separatist movements has remained stable as successful efforts are replaced by emerging ones.

Secession can take the form of actual departure from a nation-state or imperial power. Like India from the British Empire in 1947, Algeria from France in 1959, Kazakhstan from the Soviet Union in 1989. It can also be psychic removal. Like the Zapatistas who propose that every moment is an opportunity to re-define reality, whether outwardly or inwardly.

I wondered what the cadres of U.S. secessionists were thinking when Obama was elected. My own reactions ran from tears of jubilation to praying, "Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh." But I worried that the capitol would become a vast energy-sink for progressives. Would there be any reason to believe that a clanking centralized apparatus, even one headed up by an attractive, intelligent, sensitized fellow, could or would work to the benefit of communities?
--Love, Steph

In reality we are just here and now: me, writing this letter, you, reading it, while we at once breathe in the precariedad of life and the inmensidad of this cosmos that we don't understand. Whatever we do, it has to be on a human scale: community gardens, permacultured lands, eco-villages, sweat lodges, friendship, brotherhood, sisterhood, healing, loving -- and being ourselves.

--xxxooxxx, Jesús

The Mexicano intellectual Gustavo Esteva wrote, "Now is the time of the margins."

--Un beso, Jack

Staying alive and being different is our revolution. Our life has nothing to do with the U.S.

--Peace and love, Arnoldo, c/s

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