

How the Light Gets In

David Waltner-Toews, 33 Margaret Ave, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada N2H 4H1. Dr. Waltner-Toews is a veterinarian, epidemiologist, poet, and member of the Dirk Gently Gang, an international group of researchers dedicated to finding better ways of making decisions in complex socio-ecological systems. An earlier version was given as a convocation address at Rockway Mennonite Collegiate, June 20, 1998..

The world may end tomorrow. If not through wars over oil or water, or nuclear accidents or the eco-industrial wrist-slashing of free corporateers, then through meteors from space or the death of our sun. In just this way, our loved ones may die at any time. Do we therefore love them less? Of course not. It is because of this that we care more. For the tasks of sustainable human communities on this planet, there is, in the words of poet Mary Oliver, “only one question: How to love this world.” What does this mean? To love the world? Send a Hallmark card? Make a flower arrangement? Couldn't we love this place just a bit? What is it that helps us get up in the morning, humming, and actually do something to make the world just a little better?

Romance the earth by candlelight? We could do worse that look into the eyes of the biosphere and feel, again, or the first time, our primal biophilia. But, in the vast heavy blackness of the space in which we float, from whence comes this light? “There is a crack in everything”, says Canadian poet and song-writer Leonard Cohen in his song Anthem. “That’s how the light gets in.”

To romance the earth, we begin with a candle in the “encircling gloom”, but a candle is not enough. We explore outward into this complex web, as suddenly miniaturized babes in the blood networks of our collective womb. Love is curious. Why light, for instance? Love demands light. We all need light. We cannot escape it. We need light if we want to go somewhere, light for our eyes to guide our feet. Still, blind people seem to manage okay, guiding themselves through auditory and tactile clues. For the rest of us - the auditorially and tactily challenged, however - light is important. We could ask: who needs to go anywhere? We could read books. That is a way of going somewhere without going somewhere. Ah, but the trees who gave their leaves and the uranium which fed our power plants have sacrificed their light to make our reading possible. Could we sit in the dark and turn white and fat? Many of us do this, with consequences. In the long winter in northern parts of the world people can suffer from SAD - Seasonal Affective Disorder, which is a fancy way of saying that if you are cold and in the dark you tend not to be your cheery old self. The darkness creeps into your bones and into your heart. It settles there like a clammy mold, slowly re-cycling you for the benefit of bacteria and albino newts. The answer to this of course is a big satellite dish with hundreds of channels. But that really is just another form of light. Cold, blue and warped, but light nonetheless.

Even if there were a good comedy channel, we would still need to eat, and even potatoes of the non-couch variety, the ones they make chips out of, need above ground leaves to gather the radiant energy of the sun to come into being.

My fellow Dirk Gently Gang members James Kay and Mario Giampietro speak of exergy - not just any energy - but energy in useful form. Not just a general warm feeling, but energy from the sun built up into complex webs of plants and animals that we increasingly usurp, starving out other species in our frenzied feeding. This exergy, this gift from Grace, we use to build highways and parking lots and black-roofed buildings and plastic garbage bags or refrigerator storage containers or burn to run cars or tanks or airplanes. This gift of exergy is the light *need* to live, so basic and visceral a need that we are willing to steal from other species, scrounge from other people, wrest away from our children, the way we have stolen the forests and the seas and the bird-songs and the terrible marvel of insects from them.

Yet we need more than simple solar energy or bio-exergy if we are to find our way from the darkness.

The darkness is so intense. The newspaper headlines speak of slavery in the Sudan, war frenzy in desert sands, ethnic cleansing in the Balkans and the ritual worship of banker-priests in Canada. Sometimes the moral world we live in seems like such a gloomy place that the darkness is palpable, that morning breaks, literally, shattering in millions of brilliant shards against the unbreakable night. We burn everything we can - trees, coal, electrons - just to hedge ourselves against the omnivorous darkness.

If you get far enough away from the city, away from our electronic fires, out into a

field of stubble or at the edge of Lake Huron, you can look out into the vastness of the universe. The darkness, it seems, expands breathlessly in all directions. The stars are tiny points of light, candles flickering in an empty room, speaking to our sense that we are alone, speaking to our hopes.

Or perhaps the darkness is a vast dome punctured by tiny flaws through which a radiance bursts to us. If we saw this radiance in all its glory, we would surely die. Yet secretly, would we not all prefer to die in such a blaze of glory? When I was growing up, we used to talk a lot about conversion experiences. *Have you experienced the Lord?* This was a blinding, Damascus Road kind of revelation which would change your life. Some of us felt that we had such moments.

The trouble is, like any adrenaline rush, they can become addictive, and the temptation to try to capture that wild light, to cage it, to make it ours on demand, is almost overwhelming. Some of us got saved many times just to try to keep that life changing light rushing through our veins. We even carried this with us into our collective political lives. In the 1960s, we spoke of a global, world-changing revolution, ushering in an age of peace, harmony and good music. This sounds more like an epiphany than anything Karl Marx would recognize.

But if the real light, the raw, undomesticated light, cannot be counted on to come in sudden, blinding revelations, neither does it respond well to the flick of a switch. The more we try to confine the power of the Spirit to our religious power stations and

spiritual grids, the more that brilliance, escapes us. Perhaps our reach should exceed our grasp and we should aspire to be perfect even as the Spirit is perfect. Yet it is not in the grasp of perfection that the light comes to us. When we become perfect - when we *think* we are becoming perfect, when we have achieved the perfect science or the perfect philosophy or the perfect religion. Human perfection is an illusion of perfect darkness. It is in the muddled middle ground where the light comes.

Light strays our way through the cracks.

Working in Kathmandu, I am sometimes tempted to see only the filth and disease, the dirty water, the dogs next to the food and the children playing in the garbage. But, as German painter Rainer Nepita was wont to point out to me over pots of sweet, milky Nepali tea, there were also blue and yellow and red plastic baskets piled next to the shiny brass pots, women with the bright saffron and purple saris, earth-tones of the street, children, hope, breaks in the clouds. Where I saw darkness, he saw light. Where I saw the broken-ness, the cracks, he saw what was revealed in the broken-ness, the sprouts of green and light.

“Ring the bells that still can ring,” says poet Leonard Cohen. “Forget your perfect offering.” And then, in the recorded version of the song, he does something that I’m not sure even he was aware of. He creates a crack in the line. “There is a crack, a crack in everything,” he sings. “That’s how the light gets in.” The little repetition of crack, separated by a comma, a pause to let in the light. If we want to find the light, we will

need to see the cracks.

If there is a crack, that implies that there is a whole which is yet not a whole, something is fragile, but not utterly broken. But in a world seemingly torn between the smug and the shattered where can we look for this light? How can we see this? How can we find this light?

Early one morning after one of my talks with Rainer I went out into the city.

All night

the dog next door barks.

At dawn, my body's temple echoes

with confused shouts and protests,

brain cells lie toppled

in a tangled ruin.

The hotel guard,

still half asleep,

sipping from a glass of his sweet, hot tchai,

pulls his shawl more tightly around himself,

and releases me through barred gates.

The Canadian, for no apparent reason,

goes for an early morning walk through

the night-littered alleys.

Along the roofline
of Kathmandu
satellite dishes are raised,
like cupped hands
awaiting crumbs
from the gods' tables:
news from Washington,
Frankfurt,
and the Bombay movie scene.

In the cobbled streets below,
a toddler squats
amid the littered half-rot of plastic bags,
mango leaves, shattered bricks, squashed bananas..

One of the storekeepers across the street
coughs deeply, spits, and bends
to throw a stone at her.

When she has made her little pile,
she deftly drops her tattered hem
and scampers home.

A pre-teen girl
in an earth-toned plain and threadbare dress,

leans slim-limbed
across a darkened doorway.

A boy, her age-mate,
bold in a clean white shirt
and pressed blue trousers,
runs for her pleasure
to the neighbour's shop.

The slight lilt in her eyes
and the mocking uplift of her lips
tell all: no amount of candy
can save him.

A slender boy, all ribs and arms and legs,
quivers, shifting from foot to foot, in a blue tub,
arms folded stoically.

His ten-year-old sister
is splashing water over him,
rubbing him down with soap
and rags.

They burst out laughing
at the sight of me.

All day three ragged urchins

work the crowds,
one rupee, one rupee,
their voices linger over gortex,
tug at untucked, faded cotton.
Now, at dawn, like puppies,
they pile up at the roadside
in a heaving, heap of lung-rattling sleep.

On the bridge over the Bishnumati River
the vendors are laying
out their pots and shirts and fruit,
the tailors tuning their machines.
Below, the pigs forage in offal
from slaughtered buffaloes
and open latrines.

The satellite dishes bring in news
of Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Colombo,
the G-7 summit, Seinfeld, Destiny Ridge,
a new world economic order, Mad About You,
beheaded tourists, Friends,
Schwarzenegger and Schwartzkopf.
Men in dark suits

stand for the camera. A voice says
they are making progress.

I look to the hills,
the mountains cloaked in rain.
From whence will our help come?
From whence the world's end?
From whence the courage to endure?

I watch the girl on the sidewalk
very carefully stacking her lychees and peaches
in pyramids of five.
With nimble grace and dignity
she crosses her legs
and waits.

But what is this that we all long for and wait for? If light is grace, which I guess it is, then the girl on the bridge already has grace. More than the bumbling Canadian out for his morning constitutional. But if light is only grace, then there is nothing we can do to find it; grace comes to us, not us to grace. But are there places we can go where grace can find us more easily? Is there a street corner or coffee shop or a mall where she hangs out?

I once thought that perhaps the girl on the bridge had an answer, or that I had one. I now see this isn't going to happen. Neither of us, alone, can find an answer. But together, not just the girl and I, but all of us, might find an answer, might learn our way into a future worth embracing.

Later in his song, Cohen says, "Every heart to love will come, but like a refugee." So, we are back to love. After we have tried everything else, this is the refuge we flee to in our leaky boats, in our roped-together rafts of knowledge. Or, as St Paul eloquently put it, "I may be able to speak with the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell; I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains - but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned - but if I have no love, this does me no good."

Having tried everything else - perfected our technologies, our bodies, our minds, done all the self help stuff, climbed Everest, the spiritual exercises and the bodily exercises, the jogging, the yoga and the eating right - we will, if we still yearn for the light, return to love, flee to her as a last resort.

But are we any further ahead talking about love than about light? Light, grace and love, after all, are all different ways of speaking about something mysterious, powerful and wonderful at the heart of everything. What can we learn from love about

grace, about light?

Says philosopher Michael Ignatieff, “Many of the things we need most deeply in life - love chief among them - do not necessarily bring us happiness. If we need them, it is to go to the depth of our being, to learn as much of ourselves as we can stand, to be reconciled to what we find in ourselves and in those around us.”

And what do we find in the depths of our being?

Here is a riddle. In loving each other, in loving this wonderful biosphere of which we are a part, we acknowledge our separateness even as we desire wholeness. Unless we are each alone, individual, whole in ourselves, there is no one to summon love into being. Unless we are incomplete, fragments of some larger whole, we will not yearn for love. For love to become, we must be whole, and we must be broken. Well, maybe not broken, but at least cracked.

It is tempting to believe that this is all just about the fluttering of your heart, about the light that breaks through the gloom of a winter’s day when you unexpectedly see that special someone you care about, recklessly and anxiously, about teenagers trying to see the shape of each other in the darkness in the back seat of a car. But this is not just about us and our friends, about the pain of saying goodbye and the hope of seeing each other again.

This goes to the very core of ourselves as people. Our very brain is cleft in two. The left half of our brain, so researchers tell us, is analytical and logical; the right half is creative and intuitive. What makes us who we are is not just the two pieces, but the communication across them: the corpus callosum, those bundles of nerve cells, traversing the clammy, dark and uncertain depths of the longitudinal fissure. They connect the two halves of the brain. That's how the light gets in.

This goes, as well, to the very heart of our political and cultural being. It is about the most powerful and destructive forces unleashed in the past century: communism, driven by the fierce desire to make us all one; and capitalism, based on the unshakable belief that individuals are everything. Both are a refusal to accept a fundamental contradiction of life.

Ignatieff, in writing about the 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, says the following: “[His] insight is that a community of men can become masters of their needs, instead of slaves to their desires, only when they democratically decide upon some form of collective constraint on inequalities of fortune...Apparently, societies that seek to give everyone the same chance at freedom can only do so at some cost to freedom itself...Modern secular humanism is empty if it supposes that the human good is without internal contradiction.”

There is a crack in everything.

This goes, as well, to the core of the great questions we ask today, of the possibility, which many now seriously doubt, that human communities can flourish on this planet without destroying the incredible diversity of other communities of living things which make those human communities not only liveable, but possible.

Biodiversity has become a watchword for environmental activists around the world. But biodiversity is not just about all the pieces, about saving germ-plasm in banks. That misses the point entirely. More than anything biodiversity is about relationships, what goes on in the cracks between things. The wonder of nature is not just the cardinals, squirrels, the beautiful quetzal birds and lemurs and white tailed deer and timber wolves. It is not just the riches of life we find recorded in the archeological records. It is the Wagnerian chorus of them all together, the tongue-tickling harmonies, the tum-tiddling down your vertebrae, the humming in the stem cells in your bone marrow, the twisting in the ancient codes that make us who we are: the Auruch, the Quagga, Gypsonia, Dickinsonia, Glyptodont, the Moa, the Ammonites, the Trilobites. It is about the chorus bursting through us, poetry of the Burgess Shale, trios of Leaky's Lucy, the Java Man, and my grandmother, the Canadian Val-kyrie eleisons of people and grizzly bears and raccoons and trumpeter swans.

This is not just about us, but about the family of which we are part, and the communities made up of our families, and the ecosystems made up of families of millions of species. This is about being a whole, and being incomplete. This is a love, then, that *requires* an all-encompassing care, an aching tension and contradiction and

struggle. Perfect equilibrium in any living thing only comes with death. According to thermodynamic laws, we must live in tension, far from equilibrium, or we cannot live at all.

The philosopher and novelist Arthur Koestler created a language which I think can help us here. He coined the word holon to describe something that is both a part of something and whole in itself. A holon, being whole, is internally rich with relationships, like all the psycho-physiological pathways that make us who we are. But it is also a part of something larger, communicating, sending out and receiving essential messages to the larger holons, the family, the community of which it is a part. A holarchy is what a holon is part of. We are done with hierarchies, with bosses and boss-ees, with one-way, downward communications. As we must rediscover, the fundamental rule of the Biosphere, like the basic rule in the kingdom of the Spirit, is not based on authority, one over another, but on serving one another, not as shuffling slaves, but as holons. We love our neighbours - and our enemies - as we love ourselves. We communicate *with* each other. We converse. We exchange gifts. We sing. These are the relationships that make our collective life on this planet possible - and wonderful - and it is the collective life that makes our individual lives possible.

This then is our challenge as we face the new millennium: to be ourselves as individuals, and at the same time to claim our part in the whole of this wonderful creation. To be holons, simultaneously acknowledging our separateness and our

wholeness. To find ways for people of many religions and cultures to be true to themselves, and yet not to demand that everyone be like them. To love our neighbours, our enemies, our fellow species, as we love ourselves, as unique individuals, as whole, and as part. This is the contradiction at the heart of everything, the crack where the light gets in.

If we keep our senses alert and our mental eyes wide open, moving like the half-wild savannah animals we are, we may find the skills necessary to be good citizens of earth as well as good scientists, to see, and, seeing, as Pablo Neruda said, to come to life, to see “the fire that sprang to life in beautiful things”. We will then find those places where the light, and grace, will come. If we are willing to be alienated, to be lonely, and to be compassionate, then we will find the light that comes through the cracks. Maybe not a blinding flash of insight, but enough to travel by, enough to read by, enough to see where we are, the wonder of it, and to make our way.

You are not a cat

a father’s advice for his children, by David Waltner-Toews, © 2000, from *The Fat Lady Struck Dumb*, (Brick Books, London, Ontario)

Make friends. Challenge them. Wait for them.

Let your friends go. Make new ones. Welcome the old ones back. Stand by them. Sit by them.

Worry with them. Think of something bigger
of which you are a part. Create a community. Enlarge it.
Make a place for wasps, walnut trees and grackles.
Include Germany, Jordan, Belize, Indonesia
and Davis Inlet. Listen to everything
around you.

Grow up. Laugh about it. Love your innocence.
Nurture it. Love your experience. Be complicated.
Live simply. Play. Be amazed. Doubt.
When in doubt, trust.
When trust is betrayed, doubt,
and trust again.
Be disillusioned.

If you are a cat, be a cat.
If you are an ant, be an ant.
If you got through grade one, get real:
you are neither a cat nor an insect.
Dig a compost hole.
Sit with the cat, watching ants and squirrels.
Water the roses.
Listen for worms with the robins.

Have strong opinions. Argue.

Change your mind.

Make enemies. Love your enemies.

Fight for their rights. Demand your responsibilities.

Relax. Let go.

Never forget. Always forgive.

If you can't remember, let it go:

if it needs you, it will

come back.

Let the buck stop with you.

If you have a buck, share it.

Read books.

Talk to your father. Listen

to your mother. Feel

the wind on your face. Feel

the waters around you. Rise up.

Pray without ceasing.

When your cat dies,

cry your heart out.

Return your heart to its proper place.

Do an autopsy to see why
the cat died.

Remember this for your next cat.

Bury her in the back yard.

Plant a rose bush over her.

Prune the bush.

Pile cow manure around it.

Relish the scent.

Cultivate your powers of observation.

Look again.

Lose a good argument.

Be devastated.

Do good. Do it well.

Succeed. Fail. Grow.

Use e-mail. Write. Call.

Keep secrets. Share them over tea

with muffins. Be a character

in many others' lives.

Think in stories. Talk in parables.

Hum to yourself.

Sing with your friends.

Drop by for no reason.

If we are not in,

drop a note in the mailbox.

Just say hi.