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Book Review

Robert Bringhurst & Jan Zwicky (2018). **Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis**, University of Regina Press, 2018, 103 pages. ISBN 978-0-88977-565-7

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As the planetary ecological catastrophe makes itself felt with increasing devastation each passing year, more and more thinkers and activists have awakened to the very real possibility, if not inevitability, of not just the collapse of civilization but of the very web of life that supports humans and all living things. This short work is an effort to respond as honestly as possible to that prospect without indulging in the popular fantasies of salvation through technological miracles. The question it addresses is how should we conduct our lives given what we now know lies in the future?

The work consists of three independent essays, one by Robert Bringhurst, one by Jan Zwicky, and the third a collaborative effort. The authors are well known and well-respected figures in the Canadian literary scene. Bringhurst is best known for his translations of stories from the oral tradition of the Haida people of coastal British Columbia, and in 2005 he won the Lieutenant Governor's Award for Literary Excellence. Zwicky is a philosopher and poet who has taught at several universities in the USA and Canada, published books in both areas, and won the Governor General's award for Poetry in 1999. Poetry and philosophy are wedded in her thinking, which critiques as reductionist much of both analytic and post-modern philosophy.

The first essay, "The Mind of the Wild", developed out of a lecture Bringhurst gave in 2013 to a multi-disciplinary gathering of naturalists and humanists, and, like the other two essays, it confronts head-on the realization that life on this planet faces in the coming decades a planetary extinction event not unlike in its ultimate dimensions such events in the past billion years. This one, however, will be different in that it is being brought about by the way our own species, *Homo sapiens*, has very recently engaged in a way of life unsupportable by the ecosystem (what Bringhurst calls the "wild") on which it ultimately depends. The question is: How do we live in the light (or shadow) of this realization? After reflecting on the fact that all life on this planet will end some billion years from now as the sun expands, Bringhurst's appreciation of the "wild" is only intensified. The forces destroying our form of that wild must not be cooperated with. People with this appreciation can, in response, engage in cultural

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and biological disobedience, “siding, more and more, with marginal cultures—old sustainable cultures—against the unsustainable mainstream, and with other species against our own.” (p.38). This will not be done out of hope of saving the eco-system and ourselves, but of saving just our own self-respect.

Jan Zwicky originally wrote the second essay, “A Ship from Delos”, for a volume of essays on ecological virtues, and it has developed from there. In it she confronts even more directly than did the first essay this question of how one should conduct their life once one sees the extinction ahead. Zwicky compares it to Socrates’s situation after his trial and condemnation to death when the ship whose absence delayed the execution is finally sighted returning from Delos, hence the essay’s title. Her answer to the existential query is to live the way in Plato’s dialogues Socrates had always defended living and which he himself had lived, which is to say according to the virtues of wisdom or knowledge, courage, self-control, justice, compassion, and piety. She interprets the first to mean in our present context full awareness of what is going down, i.e., the destruction of life that will ensue, the injustice of how the worst will fall on the least deserving, and, if you are like her, a participating member of a wealthy society, your own part in bringing about this debacle. It is from this awareness that most of the other virtues follow, for, as a passage Zwicky quotes from Simone Weil concludes, “...that is enough, the rest follows of itself.” (p.53) I think there is much truth in this intuition. Few are those in our affluent society who, once they have fully grasped what is going down and how our whole extravagant way of life is largely responsible, are not moved to view what matters in their own life differently. And yet there are those who even afterward persist in carrying on the party. Zwicky herself notes that Socrates’s own explanation for this failure to appropriately react to what is known, namely, that these people don’t really appreciate the full reality of the crisis, is not entirely satisfying. Let me suggest here a connection with Bringhurst’s essay: they do not yet feel that to ignore the implications of their knowledge is to sacrifice their self-respect. What could be more Socratic? Plato’s message in *Republic* and many other dialogues, is that to deviate from virtue is to destroy the harmony of one’s own soul, and what could be more demeaning for a person than that?

The third and final essay is an afterword titled “Optimism and Pessimism” and results from a collaboration between our two authors. Much of it is given over to a litany of the errors both in purported facts and forms of argument committed by Steven Pinker in his book *Enlightenment Now*. Since most of what the authors say here is now acknowledged by other reviewers of Pinker’s misguided tome, it will not be dealt with here. The authors do, however, make a distinction, well worth bearing in mind, between *humanism* and *human exceptionalism*. Pinker ascribes whole-heartedly to what he terms ‘humanism’, but which the authors say is really something different, something they term ‘human exceptionalism’. The latter while acknowledging “human dependence on the rest of the world, ...cares for the rest of the world only because and to the extent that it supports a materialist form of human flourishing,” and this is Pinker’s attitude. Genuine humanists, on the other hand, “recognize that humans without an environment vastly larger and more complex than themselves are not a viable option” (p.88). Pinker does not fall into this group, whereas Bringhurst and Zwicky and most concerned environmentalists do. There is no tendency on their part to deny that many of the human achievements of the Enlightenment and of Western Culture since then have been laudable and worthwhile. But the increasing concentration on consumer pleasures since the 19th century as the epitome of human success, that sort of hedonistic humanism, has played a big role in bringing us to this catastrophic place. We can be humanists without treating



humans as some sort of exception among living things who surmount their place as part of the overall ecological system on which they depend.

Returning to the first two essays we can fairly ask whether Bringhurst's and Zwicky's different responses to our ecological predicament are in fact in deep accord. At first glance it may seem that they are not. How could Bringhurst's call for cultural disobedience against mainstream Western civilization comfortably cohere with Zwicky's advocacy of those Socratic excellences of character that are so oriented to conducting ourselves cooperatively within society? The answer, I suggest, lies in the story Socrates tells about himself in Plato's *Apology* (32). On two occasions when he was serving in a state office his colleagues overwhelmingly voted to proceed with illegal actions, but Socrates objected. In the second case he and four others were commanded to arrest a man in Salamis so that he could be put to death. However, when the five were about to set off on their mission, Socrates separated himself from the others and went "quietly home". For that he might have been executed himself, but, as he says, "the strong arm of the oppressive power did not frighten me into doing wrong". Withdrawal of support can be the form of disobedience that full knowledge of the situation demands; in Socrates's case the knowledge of what was going down was "enough" and the rest—the courage, the justice—followed of itself. Socrates's withdrawal preserved his self-respect.

What, then, does self-respect demand of those of us who now know what ecological devastation lies ahead? Bringhurst and Zwicky are challenging us to think through our answer to that question. We may not end up agreeing entirely with their own response, but we should all thank them for making the question so clear and so urgent.