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"Thy Life's A Miracle"

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# Thy Life's a Miracle

WENDELL BERRY

The expressed dissatisfaction of some scientists with the over simplifications of commercialized science has encouraged me to hope that this dissatisfaction will run its full course. These scientists, I hope, will not stop with some attempt at a merely theoretical or technical 'correction', but will press on toward a new, or a renewed, propriety in the study and the use of the living world.

No such change is foreseeable in the terms of the presently dominant mechanical explanations of things. Such a change is imaginable only if we are willing to risk an unfashionable recourse to our cultural tradition. Human hope may always have resided in our ability, in time of need, to return to our cultural landmarks and reorient ourselves.

One of the principle landmarks of the course of my own life is Shakespeare's tragedy of *King Lear*. Over the last forty-five years I have returned to *King Lear* many times. Among the effects of that play – on me, and I think on anybody who reads it closely – is the recognition that in all our attempts to renew or correct ourselves, to shake off despair and have hope, our starting place is always and only our experience. We can begin (and we must always be beginning) only where our history has so far brought us with what we have done.

Lately my thoughts about the inevitably commercial genetic manipulations already in effect or contemplated have sent me back to *King Lear* again. The whole play is about kindness, both in the usual sense, and in the sense of truth-to-kind, naturalness, or knowing the limits of our specifically *human* nature. But this issue is dealt with most explicitly in an episode of the subplot, in which the Earl of Gloucester is recalled from despair so that he may die in his full humanity.

The old earl has been blinded in retribution for his loyalty to the king, and in this fate he sees a kind of justice for, as he says, 'I stumbled when I saw'. He, like Lear, is guilty of hubris or presumption, of treating life as knowable, predictable, and within his control. He has falsely accused and driven away his loyal son, Edgar. Exiled and under sentence of death, Edgar has disguised himself as a madman and beggar. He becomes, in that role, the guide of his blinded father, who

asks to be led to Dover where he intends to kill himself by leaping off a cliff. Edgar's task is to save his father from despair, and he succeeds, for Gloucester dies at last 'Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief . . .'. He dies, that is, within the proper bounds of the human estate. Edgar does not want his father to give up on life. To give up on life is to pass beyond the possibility of change or redemption. And so he does not lead his father to the cliff's verge, but only *tells* him he has done so. Gloucester renounces the world, blesses his supposedly absent son Edgar, and, according to the stage direction, 'Falls forward and swoons'.

When he returns to consciousness, Edgar now speaks to him in the guise of a passer-by at the bottom of the cliff, from which he pretends to have seen Gloucester fall. Here he assumes explicitly the role of spiritual guide to his father.

Gloucester, dismayed to find himself still alive, attempts to refuse help: 'Away, and let me die'.

And then Edgar, after an interval of several lines in which he represents himself as a stranger, speaks the filial (and fatherly) line about which my thoughts have gathered:

Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.

This is the line that calls Gloucester back – out of hubris, and the damage and despair that invariably follow – into the human life of grief and joy, where change and redemption are possible.

The power of that line read in the welter of innovation and speculation of the bioengineers will no doubt be obvious. One immediately recognizes that suicide is not the only way to give up on life. We know that creatures and kinds of creatures can be killed, deliberately or inadvertently. And most farmers know that any creature that is sold has in a sense been given up on; there is a big difference between selling this year's lamb crop, which is, as such, all that it can be, and selling the breeding flock or the farm, which hold the immanence of a limitless promise.

A little harder to compass is the danger that we can give up on life also by presuming to 'understand' it – that is by reducing it to the *terms* of your understanding and by treating it as predictable or mechanical. The most radical influence of reductive science has been the virtually universal adoption of the idea that the world, its creatures, and all the



parts of its creatures are machines – that is, that there is no difference between creature and artifice, birth and manufacture, thought and computation. Our language, wherever it is used, is now almost invariably conditioned by the assumption that fleshly bodies are machines full of mechanisms, fully compatible with the mechanisms of medicine, industry, and commerce; and that minds are computers fully compatible with electronic technology.

This may have begun as a metaphor, but in the language as it is used (and as it affects industrial practice) it has evolved from metaphor through equation to identity. And this usage institutionalizes the human wish, or the sin of wishing, that life might be, or might be made to be, predictable.

I have read of Werner Heisenberg's principle that 'Whenever one treats living organisms as physiochemical systems they must necessarily behave as such.' I am not competent to have an opinion about the truth of that. I do feel able to say that whenever one treats living organisms as machines they must necessarily be *perceived* to behave as such. And I can see that the proposition is reversible: whenever one perceives living organisms as machines they must necessarily be treated as such. William Blake made the same point very early in this age of reduction and affliction:

What seems to Be, Is, To those to whom  
It seems to Be, and is productive of the most dreadful  
Consequences to those to whom it seems to Be . . .

For quite a while it has been possible for a free and thoughtful person to see that to treat life as mechanical or predictable or understandable is to reduce it. Now, almost suddenly, it is becoming clear that to reduce life to the scope of our understanding (whatever 'model' we use) is inevitably to enslave it, make property of it, and put it up for sale.

This is to give up on life, to carry it beyond change and redemption, and to increase the proximity of despair.

Cloning – to use the most obvious example – is not a way to improve sheep. On the contrary, it is a way to stall the sheep's lineage and make it unimprovable. No true breeder could consent to it, for true breeders always have their farm and their market in mind, and are always trying to breed a better sheep. Cloning, besides being a new method of sheep stealing, is only a pathetic attempt to make sheep

predictable. But this is an affront to reality. As any shepherd would know, the scientist who thinks he has made sheep predictable has only made himself eligible to be outsmarted.

The same sort of limitation and depreciation is involved in the proposed cloning of foetuses for body parts, and in other extreme measures for prolonging individual lives. No individual life is an end in itself. One can live fully only by participating fully in the succession of the generations, in death as well as in life. Some would say (and I am one of them) that we can live fully only by making ourselves as answerable to eternity as to time.

The problem, as it appears to me, is that we are using the wrong language. The language we use to speak of the world and its creatures, including ourselves, has gained a certain analytical power (along with a lot of expertish pomp) but has lost the power to designate *what* is being analyzed, or to convey any respect or care or affection or devotion toward it. As a result we have a lot of genuinely concerned people calling upon us to 'save' a world which their language simultaneously reduces to an assemblage of perfectly featureless and dispirited 'ecosystems', 'organisms', 'environments', 'mechanisms', and the like. It is impossible to prefigure the salvation of the world in the same language by which the world has been reduced and defaced.

By almost any standard, it seems to me, the re-classification of the world from creature to machine must involve at least a perilous reduction of moral complexity. So must the shift in our attitude toward the creation from reverence to understanding. So must the shift in our piecemeal relationship to nature from that of steward to that of absolute owner, manager and engineer. So even must our permutation of 'holy' to 'holistic', the latter term implying not mystery but understandability in the relation of part to whole.

At this point I can only declare myself. I think that the poet and scholar Kathleen Raine was correct in reminding us that life, like holiness, can be known only by being experienced. To experience it is not to 'figure it out' or even to understand it, but to suffer it and rejoice in it as it is. In suffering it and rejoicing in it as it is, we know that we do not and cannot understand it completely. We know, moreover, that we do not wish to have it appropriated by some individual or group's claim to have understood it. Though we have life, it is beyond us. We do not know how we have it, or why. We do not know what is going to happen to it, or to us. It is not predictable; though we can destroy it, we cannot

make it. It cannot, except by reduction and the grave risk of damage, be controlled. It is, as Blake said, 'holy'. To think otherwise is to enslave life, and to make, not humanity, but a few humans its predictably inept masters.

We need a new Emancipation Proclamation, not for a specific race or species, but for life itself – and that, I believe, is precisely what Edgar urges upon his once presumptuous and now desperate father:

Thy life's a miracle. Speak yet again.

Gloucester's attempted suicide is really an attempt to recover control over his life – a control he believes (mistakenly) that he once had and has lost:

O you mighty gods!  
This world I do renounce, and in your sights  
Shake patiently my great affliction off.

The nature of his despair is delineated in his belief that he can control his life by killing himself, which is a paradox we will meet again three and a half centuries later at the extremity of industrial warfare when we believed that we could 'save' by means of destruction.

Later, under the guidance of his son, Gloucester prays a prayer that is exactly opposite to his previous one –

You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me;  
Let not my worser spirit tempt me again  
To die before you please

– in which he renounces control over his life. He has given up his life as an understood possession, and has taken it back as miracle and mystery. And his reclamation as a human being is acknowledged in Edgar's response: 'Well pray you, father'.

It seems clear to me that humans cannot significantly reduce or mitigate the dangers inherent in their use of life by accumulating more information or by achieving greater predictability or more caution in their scientific and industrial work. To treat life as less than a miracle is to give up on it.



I am aware how brash this commentary will probably seem, coming from me, who have no competence or learning in science. The issue I am attempting to deal with, however, is not knowledge but ignorance. In ignorance I believe I may pronounce myself a fair expert.

One of our problems is that we humans cannot live without acting; we *have* to act. Moreover, we *have* to act on the basis of what we know, and what we know is incomplete. What we have come to know so far is demonstrably incomplete, since we keep on learning more, and there seems little reason to think that our knowledge will become significantly more complete. The mystery surrounding our life probably is not significantly reducible. And so the question of how to act in ignorance is paramount.

Our history enables us to suppose that it may be all right to act on the basis of incomplete knowledge *if* our culture has an effective way of telling us that our knowledge is incomplete, and also of telling us how to act in our state of ignorance.

We may go so far as to say that it is all right to act on the basis of sure knowledge, since our studies and our experience have given us knowledge that seems to be pretty sure. But apparently it is dangerous to act on the assumption that sure knowledge is complete knowledge – or on the assumption that our knowledge will increase fast enough to outrace the bad consequences of the arrogant use of incomplete knowledge. To trust 'progress' or our putative 'genius' to solve all the problems that we cause is worse than bad science; it is bad religion.

A second human problem is that evil exists and is an ever-present and lively possibility. We know that malevolence is always ready to appropriate the means that we have intended for good. For example, the technical means that have industrialized agriculture, making it (by very limited standards) more efficient and productive and easy, have also made it more toxic, more violent, and more vulnerable – have made it, in fact, far less dependable if not less predictable than it used to be.

Our kind of evil is the willingness to destroy what we cannot make – life, for instance – and we have greatly enlarged our means of doing that. And what are we to do? Must we let evil and our implication in it drive us to despair?

The present course of reductive science – as when we allow agriculture to be invaded by the technology of war and the economics of industrialism – *is* driving us to despair, as witness the incidence of suicide among farmers.

If we lack the cultural means to keep incomplete knowledge from becoming the basis of arrogant and dangerous behavior, then the intellectual disciplines themselves become dangerous. What is the point of the further study of nature if that leads to the further destruction of nature? To study the 'purpose' of the organ within the organisation or the organism within the ecosystem is *still* reductive if we do so with the assumption that we will or can finally figure it out. This simply captures the world as the subject of present or future 'understanding', which will become the basis of further industrial and commercial optimism, which will become the basis of further exploitation and destruction of communities, ecosystems, and local cultures.

I am not of course proposing an end to science and other intellectual disciplines, but rather a change of standards and goals. The standards of our behavior must be derived, not from the capability of technology, but from the nature of places and communities. We must shift the priority from production to local adaptation, from power to elegance, from costliness to thrift. We must learn to think about propriety in scale and design, as determined by human and ecological health. By such changes we might again make our work an answer to despair.