

BECOMING INTIMATE WITH WHAT WE CANNOT BEAR

By Renée Eli

The question has been asked: *what has changed* since January 20, 2017? It is a question that poses many and one for which there is no one easy answer. *What has changed . . . ?* presupposes a different yesterday, and by the fact of its utterance, it portends an as yet unknown tomorrow. Yet it signifies more than what supposedly has or has not occurred. In it, we encounter already a pregnant field of human feeling. For at every perceptible threshold of flux, there is the immediacy of both bygone and not-yet, and there, of sorrow, fear, desire. It is to this hungry ache that I turn in response.

Since the dawn of our existence, humanity has plundered wildly, blindly, against an always urgent, inescapable reality, which is that *being* is always at the peril of *not being*.¹ I do not mean to slip inadvertently beyond the question, *what has changed . . . ?* Rather, I want to point first to another one, *what has not changed . . . ?* so as to turn toward the overture put forth by Thomas Berry, which is that of reinventing the human.² If one hope of *Ecozoans* is to augur new ways of being human, Thomas's urging shines a shimmering light, signaling that we become intimate with the vicissitudes of our existence.

What has not changed is that we are living bodies who thirst for each next breath, slip into sleep yielding, make love—and war—with other bodies just like ours, and we yearn; and at the quivering underbelly of our bodily being, we encounter our most tender and shared vulnerability: the earnest desire *to be*—to be freely *as is* in every moment of this, our own ever-fresh existence. But to be “I” means to be moved always by the unshakeable possibility of “I” no more. We might call this *to be—not to be* coupling the proximal threshold of our bodily awareness. We do not have to hold the breath for very long to sense how hovering *not to be* always is, so much so that breath's unwitting insistence reveals not our will but an organismic desire *to be*.

All life is compelled by this very same urge. It is the primordial urge. We have only to look as far as the insect nearing and wholly avoiding collision with our aimless footstep to recognize life's common inclination. Every bodily awareness serves this toward-pull. But ours is a certain kind of awareness that both anticipates and veils *not being*. That our imminent *not being* is certain and inescapable exacts our obscuring of it and thus, the unrecognized sorrow that clouds the horizon with unceasing and escalating spoil. Thomas was pointing to this sorrow when he wrote about “the six transcendences” of the human being and the extent to which we in the West have fabricated every manner of avoiding the possibility of *not being*.³

¹ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*. (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

² Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. (New York: Bell Tower, 1999).

³ Thomas Berry, “The Place of the Human,” in *Evening Thoughts*. (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006), 25–42.

Our lives, after all, are at stake, so much so that we run the risk of projecting onto the living world the antithesis of life's pull toward itself. It is untouched angst that spurs (singularly human!) violence toward every other "I" whom we may perceive to be a threat to our continuation—be that threat biological or ideological. Thus, I turn the original question to another one: what if a first and ongoing task of *Ecozoans* is to look *not being*, which is to say, death, squarely in its iridescent eye and see its belonging in the oceanic tide of living? I mean seeing *not being* with the whole of our bodies, tremulous and startled soft by the immense emptiness of it. To touch in this way is an experience akin to the exquisitely uncomfortable Buddhist practice of meditating on one's finality and irreversible absence. And what would be the point of this touching? In the words of biophilosopher, Andreas Weber, "The difficult task for our imaginations is to consider the necessity of death deeply enough that through it we begin to grasp the current wave of planetary devastation."⁴ It is how we are, finally, with the gaping crevice of *not being* that is most worthy of our attention (and care!) if we are to transform the human being, not because *not being* is not real, but because it is, and it shapes the undulating folds of our world and our lives in it.

Hence, what if we come to see every word or act of hate, of violence, of "evil," as, in some way, an act of the most exquisite sorrow? I do not mean apology. I mean the unbearable feeling of the mute barrenness of *not being* that hangs in every breath, motivating every human act of animal aggression gone untoward. If the daily headlines of the past year disclose anything at all, they expose an untamable and altogether unavoidable human sorrow—gone wild.⁵ For any one of us reading them, to the extent that any headline incites an immediate inclination to point a finger at one party or person, or several, or many, then we are, in that moment, what we hope to transcend. If these finger-pointing thoughts go unnoticed, we miss touching a side of sorrow that can transform us. I am suggesting that we embrace the poetic immensity of feeling. And I wonder: can we bear being bereft?

There is more. The idea of *eco* (-zoic, -ology, -system, -sphere, and so on) is insufficient. *Eco* is a tacit, moment-by-moment reality, given already by the fact that we are bodies. That our own bodies are comprised of more cells of "others" than of "our own" is reason to apprehend that I am not an "I" but many. Who is to say then that the thoughts on this page are mine? If they are not mine, to whom do they belong? Who is to say those words uttered by another are not my own? These questions are not rhetorical; nor are they the callow mimicking of a Zen kōan. Rather, they are starting points to explore wholly the shared landscape of *together-I-am*.

Can we see in ourselves, then, the very same conditions of violence that shape the speech and acts we claim to abhor? Can we go so far as to see in ourselves that we, too, are the same violence—even by our every wantonly justified condemnation? These are terrifying questions.

⁴ Andreas Weber, *Matter & Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, trans. Rory Bradley. (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2017), 173.

⁵ I very loosely borrow from Francis Weller the idea of a "wild" side of sorrow. Weller writes about what he refers to as the "sacred work of grief" in Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

To the extent that we can peer into them with piercing, sensitive focus, as if with the fine tuning of a microscope, we may penetrate an unbreakable softness. This was Krishnamurti's plain urging, to "become intimate" with the violence that shapes every one of us—not by condemning it but by relating with it, flesh and bone.⁶ When we do so with the goodness of a child's innocence, and curiosity, we may find ourselves standing at the portal of a clearing, glowing and supple with the pulsing of our transformed, tender hearts. It is our naked desire *to be—as is* that we fear laying bare, even to ourselves, because this desire has in it already our fear of *not being*. It is only in unclothing this vulnerability—before ourselves—that new, enlivening ways of being human may be revealed.

In the still surging wave of events of the past year, what we now see is that we can no longer not see what was before us already, albeit shrouded . . . perhaps . . . just so. What is called for is nothing less than rapt intimacy with feeling, with lamentation for what we have seen, heard, experienced, done, known, and believed, and with endurance. This is not the endurance of teeth-gritting bearing down and holding on. It is an absorbed intimacy with the staggering weight of despair, fear, and sorrow, and paradoxically, a primordial desire *to be freely as is*. This is an intimacy that unfurls reverie.⁷ Weber insists that "Our only way out is to understand that this misery cannot be made to disappear; it must be endured and transformed."⁸ For this, he calls for a "metaphysics in the mood of loss,"⁹ offering:

A metaphysics in the mood of loss limits itself to mourning pain rather than to repairing it. It contents itself with feeling, not with fixing, and waits for what is felt to be real and for needing to be really done, open to every solution, confident in life's desire to heal. It no longer seeks desperately to separate the light from the darkness.¹⁰

Such a view aligns with the philosophy of the Center for Ecozoic Studies. I recall a 2014 newsletter to the clergy and parish from the Dean of The Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, North Carolina, the Very Reverend Todd Donatelli, who wrote: "Can it be the community who knows how to lament [. . .] is the one who finds barren places to be springs of life?"¹¹ I wonder.

⁶ J. Krishnamurti, *Freedom from the Known*, ed. by Mary Lutyens. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1969), 53.

⁷ For more on the transformative attributes of wholly entering into the grips of grief, see Robert Romanyshyn, *The Soul in Grief: Love, Death and Transformation*. (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1999).

⁸ Weber, *Matter and Desire*, 170.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 174–175.

¹¹ Todd Donatelli, "The Landscape of Fall into Winter: Ending as the Advent of a New Year." *The Cathedral Connection* (Newsletter), November 2014, http://www.allsouls cathedral.org/Cathedral_Connection/nov-2014.pdf.