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CREATIVE FRAILTY

Some thoughts on global catastrophe, the gift economy and the third age

Lesley Saunders

I began writing this essay in response to the global environmental ruin threatening to overwhelm us and the natural world in which we live, and on which all of us depend. Now another global catastrophe has struck, which has seemingly pushed everything else to the back of our minds and certainly off the front pages of the media. At this moment, as I sit at my table looking out of the window into our small town garden in the south of England, one observable difference between the two catastrophes is that the wildlife now seems to be flourishing — trees coming into bright leaf, birds frantically nest-building, hundreds of little blue flowers starring the ground. There is very little road traffic, no overhead noise from aeroplanes, much less pollution; and a herd of goats has been seen wandering down a Welsh high street — could this be a reprieve for nature?

It is impossible to know what the long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic will be, especially on the environment, as humans urgently re-build their societies and economies. Because there is evidence that the chain of virus transmission involved bats, pangolins and 'wet markets', there will no doubt be talk about the need to remake our relationship with animals; but whether and how far this will translate into large-scale action on behalf of the world's fauna and flora is doubtful.

What is clear is that the climate crisis and its associated harms are primarily a political catastrophe: anthropogenic climate change and other environmental damage have been known about, reported on and campaigned against for at least four decades. The current scale and pace of destruction and the despair it trails in its wake have been brought about because governments and big business have so far taken little or no action proportionate to the need. What to do? I have no answers beyond the obvious, that a sea-change is needed in our politics and economics as well as in our policies. On the one hand, we must acknowledge the level of threat that humans are inflicting on the planet without resorting to prelapsarian or millenarian views. On the other, we are in the grip of an ideology that manifests itself, amongst other things, as a commitment to 'growth' at all, and any, costs. The problem is not one of sufficiency, but of (re-) distribution. And — perhaps unsurprisingly — this is as tragically true of the effects and consequences of the pandemic as of those of the climate catastrophe.

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Although it is impossible to reflect on the state of things without a sense of fear and grief, we are

discovering that there are many resources that can help us think more connectedly and constructively. And so I have managed to find a little consolation — and some practical wisdom — in the idea of the ‘gift economy’, a concept given cogency by Lewis Hyde back in the 1980s in his book *The Gift*. The gift economy relies not on relentless growth and expansion but rather on a sense of belonging and mutual exchange. Hyde writes eloquently of the role of gift-giving and gift-receiving, which he argues helps to create ‘a social life motivated by feeling and nonetheless marked by structure, durability and cohesion ... It is ... when a part of the self is given away that community appears’ (94). He is not talking just about Christmas and birthdays.

On a personal level, I am writing this as I enter my second decade of ‘retirement’. When I can think beyond the horrors of the present moment, I can see and celebrate a fascinating and fruitful connection between the gift economy and the period of active life after paid employment has ended: this is *par excellence* the time of gift-exchange. People like myself enjoy an especial, an especially-privileged, position: I mean people who benefited from the establishment of the welfare state in the post-war period, from free state secondary education up to sixth form level and then from the expansion of tertiary education in the 1960s; and who are now in the post-employment phase of our lives because we were able to retire in our sixties. Because of all this, our generation is often blamed for the current state of the economy and the environment. This points an accusing finger in the wrong direction, because many — though by no means all — of us were activists in the civil rights, environmental and pacifist movements in our youth. Nonetheless, we should, and often do, feel an obligation to ‘give something back’. What might that look like?

Well, for a start, we probably have not stopped working altogether. Some of us wish, like the Roman poet Horace, to spend more time in nature (he had his small but beloved farm in the Sabine countryside, many of us have our morning walks in parks and woods, our afternoons weeding a garden). But many of us undertake voluntary, honorary and/or *pro bono* work, for the pleasure of giving our particular gifts, as well as responding to the call we feel towards particular causes.

What we have in common is that we are approaching the end of our lives, the so-called third age. We already know what our long-term prospects are, so to speak. So this is a stage of life when we no longer give thought to our CVs or career paths, our employability; we may not care that much about respectability, appearance, performance, success. We may be more prepared to use the metaphors of ‘deepening’ and ‘enriching’ as distinct from ‘improving’ and ‘expanding’. We are, in a word, free; freer than we may have felt or been since we were young; and we can at least try to wear our years lightly.

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One of my most fulfilling roles in the last few years has been as visiting professor at Newman University in Birmingham, UK, an institution — originally a training college for teachers — named after the great religious educator John Henry Newman; in October 2019 he was canonised by Pope Francis. As a non-religious person, I am most moved by Newman’s idea of the university as a community of thinkers whose desire and purpose is ‘the cultivation of the intellect’. The word ‘cultivation’ is vital, as in tending, nurturing, refining, making good both ethically and aesthetically. That is how I have experienced the small community of academics and mature students participating

in the professional doctorate programme at the university. Moreover, I know many other contemporaries who are affiliated in some way to not-for-profit bodies, for example, as school governors, trustees of charities, local/national committee members, advisers, mentors, campaigners and so forth. From such positions, those of us who are of like mind can, I believe, exert a benign, albeit modest, influence simply because we have nothing to prove, nothing to gain materially, and truly nothing to lose.

I am most definitely not claiming that mere longevity, nor even a distinguished past career, is a guarantor of wisdom, relevance, usefulness; more that our collective experience, mediated by shared critical reflection within a community that revels in its diversity, is a resource that is freely available to a world in need of these qualities. It is a resource that can teach people not *what* to think but *how* to think, with imagination and compassion, with an awareness of complexity and provisionality, as well as with reason and evidence. To pick up the horticultural theme, this is the contrary of Voltaire's admonition in *Candide* that we should cultivate our own gardens, mind our own business.

Certainly as individuals we may not feel strong, as we cope with loss of eyesight, of hearing, of mobility, as we mourn the death of friends and colleagues, and live with an ever-present knowledge of mortality. Indeed, we are reminded every day that our age group is particularly vulnerable to contracting severe, even fatal, forms of the disease caused by COVID-19. But I suspect that the mortality some of us dread even more deeply is that of the planet. Could it be that this awareness is what endows us with unique opportunities and responsibilities in the social polity — even if such opportunities are in constant danger of being wasted, the responsibilities shirked?

If we can realise it, however, this is a way of being in the world that I want to call 'creative frailty' — acknowledging both our increasing vulnerability and our undimmed imaginative capacity? Our very frailty slows us down, so that instead of throwing ourselves into action we may practise an activism of the mind and spirit, which impels us to listen and think before we speak or do.

For we can learn something from almost anybody without assenting to their worldview; and be enriched in tiny and subtle ways by having to acknowledge someone else's reality without yielding up our own hard-won, thoughtful principles. We should remind ourselves that it is the countless species of different flora and fauna that make up our ideal garden, our longed-for paradise-on-earth. And I believe all this deepens rather than diminishes our sense of urgency.

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Finally, this stage of life is also, for me, connected with aspects of what the writer and activist Edward Said called 'late style'. On the one hand, he explains, the last works of some artists, writers and composers 'reflect a special maturity, a new spirit of reconciliation and serenity often expressed in terms of a miraculous transfiguration of common reality'. On the other, there is the kind of artistic lateness that manifests itself 'as intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction ... a non-harmonious, non-serene tension and, above all, a sort of deliberately unproductive productiveness going **against...**' [emphasis in original]. I find myself drawn towards both kinds of late style in my own work and thinking; I notice how I both want and resist resolution: wanting to find reconciliation, unite opposites, embrace a heedful optimism; and at the same time resisting any synthesis of apparently

intractable contradictions, any smoothing of rough intellectual and ethical edges.

Those of us with a vision for the planet's survival, along with that of all its inhabitants, can see how far destructive ideologies are blighting public discourse and intellectual endeavour as well as the natural environment. Our task as third-agers should be to remain open-hearted, open-minded and inter-connected through our networks despite (or because of) our personal frailties — and thereby to exemplify the truth of our global inter-dependencies. And perhaps this will empower us to offer practical and moral support to those struggling inside the system to make our institutions, our businesses and our politics — never perfect, always evolving — fit for some kind of future at this time of utmost need?

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