

On Being Sent “How We Are Not Alone” by a Well-Wisher

Alan was feeling more and more like a grumpy old man. On that particular afternoon, he was sitting in his study and working on his computer when a gentle “ping” announced the arrival of an email. He saw it was from a friend of his wife’s, and when he clicked to open it, he saw that attached to it was a poem by Maya Stein called “How We Are Not Alone”.

“Bloody Hell! Poetry” he thought. And the sort that doesn’t even rhyme. Some of it’s a bit obscure. I suppose it’s all about Unity. Or Oneness. Or Holism. Or Interbeing.

It’s the kind of thing that Tich Nhat Hanh was getting at in those books Laura and I read on our last holiday, back before Covid. They were in the tradition of Eastern sages stretching right back to Lao Tzu and the Buddha some two and a half thousand years ago. But it all seemed modern and relevant to us at the time.

And it wasn’t only in Asia, was it? We recalled Heraclitus writing, “the only constant thing is change,” but also that “all is one”. And didn’t Plato argue that there is a fundamental unity and order behind the diversity of the natural world?

There’s been no shortage of poems about connectedness, either. I suppose everyone has heard of John Donne, or at least the words of his most famous meditation. “No man is an island” or “Ask not for whom the Bell tolls”. But why did he draw the boundary where he did, we sometimes wondered? “Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind”, is what he wrote.

He wouldn’t get away with that today, of course. According to Laura “the tofu-eating wokerati would have him cancelled before he could utter a single ‘Hail Mary’.”

“And never mind Douglas Adams’ forty-two”, Laura might have added. “JD probably wouldn’t even reach double figures if Ford Prefect were marking his papers.”

It’s not as if he could plead ignorance - he was a Roman Catholic priest and scholar. More than four hundred years before the Meditations were published, Francis of Assisi had taught about the connectedness of all living things and the importance of compassion and respect for the natural world.

But JD wasn’t the last person to fall short of St. Francis’s insight – let alone Plato’s or Buddha’s. Despite all the scientists, philosophers and theologians telling us how everything is connected, we still talk about “nature” – meaning everything in the world that isn’t human. We talk about “the environment” as if our planet and everything non-human on it exists purely to showcase us. And we treat it accordingly - to serve human purposes. We measure the health and the size of nations by economic measures, establishing money – a human concept that facilitates the trading of goods - as the measure of all things.

It’s as if unity or oneness or holism or interbeing are all right in poetry or in theory – but in practice, we know what really matters – WE do. We act as if humans are the most important things in the universe, and whatever our theologians, philosophers or scientists tell us – everything non-human is simply grist to our mill. And there are some humans we’re not so sure about, either.

Oh hell! What does it matter anyway? The world's a bloody mess, and nothing's the same anymore. Whatever the sodding poet says, when it comes down to it, we're all on our own."

Shaking his head as if to dispel his thoughts, Alan carefully composed his reply. "Thank you very much for your kind thoughts and sympathy for my recent bereavement. Laura would have loved the poem."

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