Document généré le 23 avr. 2024 11:01

The Trumpeter
Journal of Ecosophy

Obscured by Cloud: Educating in the Anthropocene

Christopher Thomas Peters

Volume 34, numéro 1, 2018

Focus on Laudato Si'

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060960ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1060960ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

1705-9429 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Peters, C. (2018). Obscured by Cloud: Educating in the Anthropocene. *The Trumpeter*, *34*(1), 203–211. https://doi.org/10.7202/1060960ar

Résumé de l'article

We are caught just now between acting in the face of an overwhelming environmental collapse, and trying to understand where to begin. How do we educate for this new reality? What are the stories that need telling, now? The answer, of course, isn't found in technological marvels or bio-engineering. To know the world, this place - the northeast Avalon Peninsula, attached to Newfoundland proper by a narrow isthmus - we have to be in it. We'll take the sleet and the rain, the howling winds and the sudden downpours. We'll take the swirl of May fogs, with the mercury struggling to break five degrees Celsius, that last for days like weeks. We need the mundane. The mundane defines us. It brings people together. It grounds us in stories that speak back years and generations, all rooted here.

Copyright (c) Christopher Thomas Peters, 2019

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

The Trumpeter
ISSN 0832-6193
Volume 34, No. 1 (2018)

Obscured by Cloud: Educating in the Anthropocene

Christopher Thomas Peters

Being Human

My neck ached from staring up. The whine of mosquitoes in my ears, the sting of bites along my shoulders, and the driving, maddening itch made me want to pack up and head back for the swirling comfort of the campfire, the nylon relief of the tent.

But instead I stood rooted. A bat went by, black against black. My brothers and I broke the silence periodically, commenting on the quiet ("It's deafening," my brother commented. A comment that managed to be mysterious, obvious, and true at the same time.) and letting reverberating farts (refried beans cooked over the campfire) roar into the night. The latter returned us all to adolescence, laughing until our stomachs ached.

We didn't leave though. The stars pricked out, slowly at first. Then, as the last of the daylight ebbed away, the indigo dark seeped up the stars scattered in waves of twinkling light. The Perseid meteor shower shot by, a smile playing at my lips every time I caught a startling, sudden streak of light. In the time between we picked out the constellations we knew. Big Dipper. Little Dipper. *Was that Orion?* We were humbled by the limits of our knowledge, something so basic yet beyond us. Then we stopped, letting the silence sit.

The scale of the sky, its twinkling vastness, stepped beyond anything human made. The Milky Way swept deep into the cosmos and the smallness of Me, the individual, was overwhelming. That soon fell away to a sense of union with something infinitely larger than my lived experiences or imagination could hold onto. Try getting your head around that and you find yourself spinning at the precipice of a never-ending chasm. It is the hugeness, of which we are all a part, that every religion tries to pin down. To make human.

So we stood, getting eaten alive by mosquitoes, our necks aching. And every once in a while farting and giggling like the fools we are.

Finding the Profound in the Everyday

I once walked along a darkened trailway in the late afternoon. I should have been doing renovations. I should have been sheeting drywall or rewiring outlets or connecting up the sink. But instead I listened to another call and walked into the boreal.

The trail I followed was overgrown. Alder and dogberry giving way to spruce and fir, the odd thicket of larch and birch. Trees knocked over in a not-so-recent windstorm were overgrown in lichens and moss. The light was diffused. I am not easily spooked, but this was not a place for lingering. The grown-over root cellars and old, dry stone foundations spoke to the purpose this place once had. It was haunted by memories and dreams, of lives lived and lost. *Here*.

It's a familiar story in Newfoundland.

The trail hugged the coastline, and at clearings I could look upon the vastness of Conception Bay, Newfoundland. Bell Island giving way to roiling waves, Kelly's Island forlorn in the distance.

I was startled from my mental reverie by the sudden exhale of a Leviathan. Then another. Whales! And I stood, stalk still in that haunted forest where a community once gathered at the in between of coast and boreal, listening. Unbidden, a smile played on my face.

Today, we are searching for The Profound. We are looking for something both authentic and meaningful that sets us apart. Moments that resonate and reverberate. We want our lives, curated, to be immortalized on Instagram or YouTube.

There is a place for The Profound, when we are mesmerized, humbled before the Greater. "Before me extends a low hill trembling in yellow brome, and behind the hill, filling the sky, rises an enormous mountain ridge, forested, alive, and awesome with brilliant brown lights. I have never seen anything so tremulous and live," wrote Annie Dillard in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.[1]

I have never seen anything so tremulous and live. If that's not an encounter with The Profound, what is?

But we cannot have The Profound without the everyday. We must walk in woods, dark and overgrown with life and memories. We must plant seeds, literal and figurative, to know what creation is, to be able to harvest. Our hands need to be deep in the world, scuffed, dirty, and calloused. We must deal with shit to know beauty - unadorned, fleeting.

A Komatik

A few years ago I built a komatik as an afterthought Christmas gift for my daughters. I thought it might last a season, hoped for two. Komatik is a bastardization of the Inuit *qumatik*, which means a rawhide lashed sledge with wooden crossbeams and runners. Sometimes, when wood

[1]Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975).

was scarce, they were made of bone. These were tools of craftsmanship and precision, which demonstrated an acute awareness of the strength and capability of the few resources available to the Inuit.[2]

My komatik, instead, is of a rude and rough construction. I repurposed a wooden pallet for the sledge and drilled screws through wooden supports into a pair of cross-country skis, thick with dust and lost for years in the attic rafters, for runners. I have a jute rope strung between two metal loops which I use for hauling it. I painted it turquoise because I had some leftover marine paint.

We get a lot of moisture on Newfoundland's northeast Avalon Peninsula. Fog and rain, snow and sleet, and everything in between. This wet, sometimes changing with the seasons from sleet to snow to rain to sleet again, borne aloft on westerlies that hum through the trees and make houses shake loose on their foundations. You can, on a day here with a good blow, feel the thrum of the wind in your guts. It will snatch and tear at your breath. Anyway, the paint was a good idea. The komatik has lasted three seasons of abuse.

The girls, out of all proportion to my hopes, love this komatik. We've gone trudging through thigh-deep drifts. We've had it running, really humming across crusty snow in hard freezes. It catches snow when it comes down soft, like a shovel, so that I am left panting and sweaty after a hundred metres, often less. The girls, laying down on their stomachs with their heads forward to the world, will be buried, laughter muffled under their hoods and snow. I have postholed through spring snow come far too early, my legs soaked from the rotten mess of blue-grey wetness. Whatever the weather, the girls find a way to laugh, to make worlds of their own and create games to which I'm only partially partner. But that's okay. I enjoy listening to them as I pull/haul/swear(quietly)/trudge.

I like this komatik because I built it. People will stop me and comment on the komatik. "A homemade sled," they'll say. "You don't see many of those anymore."

I like that my daughters have found joy in it.

But mostly I like it because it brings us into the world. Pulling the komatik, you can hear the patter of sleet on fir needles, the drip of melt. The first of the birdsongs in a February rainstorm. There's a feel for the seasons.

That komatik brings me out into the world during bright winter sunshine, when you can stand atop Cowan Hill, the local sledding spot, and see all the way down the southern shore. The green hills stark against the snow in the deep blue of a January sky, swept clean by the rushing

[2]Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2014).

winds. The plume of my breath catching in the cold. It's easy to see The Profound in such moments. But the komatik also brings us out during the miserable murk of February and March and sometimes April, slipping and banging my shins hard on ice, my boots soaked in the sullen water collected atop the icy slush.

The komatik puts me in touch with the mundane. It's in such moments between the mundane and The Profound where the business of living truly happens.

How We Are Human Matters

You would have a strong case in suggesting that the world has greater concerns just now than our desire for The Profound at the expense of the mundane. You could suggest I am a bit naïve speaking of trudging through a slushy mess on a March morning in Newfoundland in search of it.

We are, after all, living in a time of change on a scale not seen in our time, or human time. Species, both plant and animal, are disappearing at a rate a *thousand times* greater than they should be.[3] Deforestation, desertification, urbanization, progress - these have become catch words that fail to snare the intense onslaught we are wreaking upon the natural world. How do you capture in a word, a phrase, the real concern that as the Arctic and Antarctic continue to warm, millions of tonnes of carbon and methane will be released into the atmosphere and accelerate climate change?[4]

A positive feedback loop?

There doesn't seem to be anything positive about it.

As a husband, a father, and a teacher I wonder at my responsibilities. How do I prepare my family for a world that will be warmer (*is* warmer) in my lifetime? What are the skills my daughters need to navigate this new world?

The Arctic has already warmed between four and six degrees Celsius. The ice is melting away, 'bergs calving off.[5] This has offered a weird tourist bonanza here in Newfoundland. Boats will

[3]David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition," *The New York Magazine*, July 14, 2017, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html.

[4]David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition," *The New York Magazine*, July 14, 2017, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html.

[5]Scott Waldman, "Forget That Big Iceberg - A Smaller One in the Arctic Is More Troubling," *Scientific American*, July 31, 2017, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/forget-that-big-iceberg-a-smaller-one-in-the-arctic-is-more-troubling.

take you out to circle these towering castles of ancient ice, slowly melting away in the Labrador Current. The meltwater nourishes small ecosystems beneath the water, fish who crave the cold temperatures and blooms of phytoplankton. But it's only temporary. There's only so much ice, and every year there's less of it.

We plant our vegetables in garden beds on our lawn, to the consternation of our suburban neighbours. We built a greenhouse off the side of our shed. I am friendly with a local horse farmer, and make biannual trips to haul composted horse manure back home to nourish next season's vegetables. The girls have picked cabbage caterpillars off leaves left as stark skeleton membranes of green. They have planted garlic and harvested potatoes and carrots.

Is that enough?

We are wasting so much topsoil we will well run out of it in 60 years.[6] How, exactly, do we expect to grow food in the 22nd century? It takes thousands of years to make the stuff. And it's bioengineering beyond the ken of us, involving fungi, bacteria, insects, worms, mammals, all tied into a complex system composting death back into life. The dance these components weave, each integral to the whole, is something science understands in its basics, but doesn't grasp in its nuanced totality. It's a dance to which we cannot hear the music and don't know the moves.

And even if we manage to protect what topsoil we have left, the rapid increase in global temperatures means we have almost guaranteed that the places that nourish the world today will struggle to grow anything in the years to come. The strange 'flash drought' in Montana this past summer is a case in point. Wheat and corn fields wilted after spring and summer rains never came and a baking heatwave descended on the plains.[7]

The oceans are acidifying because they have absorbed most of the excesses of the carbon dioxide our rapid industrialization has pumped into the atmosphere. They are now 25% more acidic than they were 50 years ago. There isn't, scientists think, any way to stop this.[8]

Phytoplankton are susceptible to acidification. We rely on phytoplankton blooms to create

[6]George Monbiot, "We're treating soil like dirt. It's a fatal mistake, as our lives depend on it," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/25/treating-soil-like-dirt-fatal-mistake-human-life.

[7]Kathleen McLaughlin, "The unprecedented drought that's crippling Montana and North Dakota," *The Guardian*, September 7, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/07/flash-drought-north-dakota-montana-wildfires.

[8]*The Revolution*, directed by Rob Stewart (2012).

oxygen.[9]

The cod fishery here is at a crossroads. There are rumours that it's coming back. Though any honest fisher will tell you, it's nothing like it was before the trawlers and the factory ships ended the cod migration. It's an old story, *here*. We ended the Great Auks and killed out the right whales on the Labrador Sea. The sea ice is melting so every year the harp seals, who once hauled themselves on the ice to whelp their pups, are finding new places. Like the rocky harbour mouths that once thronged with trap skiffs and rodneys and the smell of woodsmoke in the grey light of a March dawn.

Now emptied save for the cries of seals.

What once was becomes a far-flung memory, a story we can't be sure was ever true.

If that wasn't enough, the oceans are full of plastic.[10]

Craft beer is full of these microplastic pieces, too.[11]

Can *nothing* be sacred?

If we spend too long thinking about one of these problems, never mind the crushing weight of all of them, then the smallness of Me to solve anything becomes impossible. You find yourself poised at the precipice of a never-ending chasm of despair.

But here is my point, made again. We need the mundane. To know the world, this place - the northeast Avalon Peninsula, attached to Newfoundland proper by a narrow isthmus - we have to be in it. We'll take the sleet and the rain, the howling winds and the sudden downpours. We'll take the swirl of May fogs, with the mercury struggling to break five degrees Celsius, that last for days like weeks. The mundane defines us. It brings people together. It grounds us in stories that speak back years and generations, all rooted here.

This is my responsibility, living here with my wife and daughters. Here is what I am charged to teach my students. That's how we begin, again. Recognizing we are thrall to this web of connection.

---

[9]David Wallace-Wells, "The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition," *The New York Magazine*, July 14, 2017, http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html.

[10]Bill Dunham, "World's Oceans Clogged by Millions of Tons of Plastic Trash," *Scientific American*, February 12, 2015, https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/world-s-oceans-clogged-by-millions-of-tons-of-plastic-trash.

[11]Dan Nosowitz, "Plastic Bits Found Floating Around in 24 out of 24 Samples of German Beer," *Modern Farmer*, October 22, 2014, https://modernfarmer.com/2014/10/plastic-bits-found-floating-around-24-24-samples-german-beer.

Encountering Nature

The light was falling in the October sky. I held onto the rear handles of the all-terrain vehicle, wishing I had decided to wear something more seasonally appropriate than shorts.

Our daughters, his two and my two, were off playing in the forests around the cabin. Our wives had charged us with dessert while they made supper. So we had gone berry picking, my friend and I. We had come across late season blueberries, still firm and ripe despite the season's first frosts. There were partridgeberries, too, ripening nicely. And cranberries, too.

The air smelt of the season, of the forest.

We picked our fill of berries quickly, though we weren't rushing. Nodded to a few moose hunters passing by, stern-faced with rifles slung casually over shoulders, eyes lined from scouring the green and yellow surroundings for sight of their quarry.

In the slanting sun and moving, I had been warm. But now, moving quickly in the shadows, I was getting cold.

We came around a bend and a coyote stood on the road. My friend slowed, stopped, but the coyote, a yearling, bolted. The coyote ran through an alder thicket and came up on a rise. It turned, looking at us. It's eyes yellow-green.

I want to ascribe some meaning in those eyes. Feral wisdom. The Wild. But I think it was wary, taking us in and knowing what we meant. It looked mangy, hard-worn. It certainly wasn't very big. It looked like it subsisted on voles, what birds it could hunt, the remains of moose carcasses, and berries.

Then it bolted. Was gone. But I was glad of bearing witness to it.

Concluding Thoughts: Placing Humans in the World

"*My contention is that we have removed contributors (children) from society's survival, treating them as playthings or investments in a remote future.… This goes a long way towards explaining why we are left with a society that is sliding unawares into eco-social catastrophe*."

-Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng, *Ecophilosophy Fragments*[12]

The late Norwegian philosopher, activist, and potato farmer Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng was a

[12]Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng, *Ecophilosophy Fragments: Writings, Drawings, Testimonies*, eds. Bob Henderson and Aage Jensen (Uxbridge, Ontario: Chrismar Books, 2015).

critic of the lies modern society has sold us. He argued, well before it was fashionable, that common markets and integrated economies were bringing us down a path that would devastate local ecologies and economies both. He foretold that once on such a path we could not easily remove ourselves from it.

"Economic sustainability is dependent upon the existence of local, living cultures that have an inside relationship to Nature," he wrote. "I would say that these are cultures that are based on meaningful work."[13]

Fishing for cod in a small outport, to sustain the community, is meaningful work. Cutting down firewood is meaningful work. Picking berries is meaningful work. Snaring hares with your son in tow is meaningful work. Watching your grandmother make supper from locally sourced and grown ingredients is meaningful work.

Meaning, then, isn't about making money. Meaning is what binds us together as a human community with the local ecology. It is what allows us to live in partnership with our surroundings.

We don't talk much about living in communion with the world around us. We certainly don't live in communion with our surroundings.

The way back to living in partnership with nature and each other will not be easy. We are at the bottom of a steep valley, and there isn't a path back up. But it can start by taking the time to stop and watch a Northern Flicker on a spruce bough. To listen to the metallic shrill of a blue jay. To watch the play of waves on a granite shoreline. To plant potatoes in May. There do we find The Profound in the mundane, and find our way to surer footing.

[13]Sigmund Kvaloy Setreng, *Ecophilosophy Fragments: Writings, Drawings, Testimonies*, eds. Bob Henderson and Aage Jensen (Uxbridge, Ontario: Chrismar Books, 2015).

Works Cited

Dillard, Annie. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. New York: Harper Collins, 1975.

Dunham, Bill. "World's Oceans Clogged by Millions of Tons of Plastic Trash." *Scientific American*, February 12, 2015. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/world-s-oceans-clogged-by-millions-of-tons-of-plastic-trash.

Lopez, Barry. *Arctic Dreams*. New York: Vintage Classics, 2014.

McLaughlin, Kathleen. "The unprecedented drought that's crippling Montana and North Dakota." *The Guardian*, September 7, 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/sep/07/flash-drought-north-dakota-montana-wildfires.

Monbiot, George. "We're treating soil like dirt. It's a fatal mistake, as our lives depend on it." *The Guardian*, March 25, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/25/treating-soil-like-dirt-fatal-mistake-human-life.

Nosowitz, Dan. "Plastic Bits Found Floating Around in 24 out of 24 Samples of German Beer." *Modern Farmer*, October 22, 2014. https://modernfarmer.com/2014/10/plastic-bits-found-floating-around-24-24-samples-german-beer.

Setreng, Sigmund Kvaloy. *Ecophilosophy Fragments: Writings, Drawings, Testimonies*, edited by Bob Henderson and Aage Jensen, Uxbridge, Ontario: Chrismar Books, 2015.

Stewart, Rob, dir. *The Revolution*. 2012.

Waldman, Scott. "Forget That Big Iceberg - A Smaller One in the Arctic Is More Troubling." *Scientific American*, July 31, 2017. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/forget-that-big-iceberg-a-smaller-one-in-the-arctic-is-more-troubling.

Wallace-Wells, David. "The Uninhabitable Earth, Annotated Edition." *The New York Magazine*, July 14, 2017. http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans-annotated.html.