

## Frost and Snow<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Why awaken the soul to justice if the only result can be to increase awareness of the futility of aspiring to justice in the world? Zwicky documents challenges to the belief that teaching philosophy will result in a fairer polity and suggests that perception of being's integrity sustains pursuit of philosophy as a way of life.

### Keywords:

philosophy as a way of life, teaching philosophy, politics, despair, Plato, Pierre Hadot, Karen Stenner, Tu Fu

I was sitting on the floor in front of the wood stove one evening late in 2007 when I realized my vocation for teaching had disappeared. One moment it was there, the next it had vanished. At the time, I put this down to the sudden intrusion of an image: the sea of laptops my classroom had recently become. I had resolutely refused to sign on to the digital revolution (even now I do not own a cell phone or have a social media account) and the influx of laptops suggested to me that I would be unable to communicate with this new generation of students. Not because I was failing to use Power Point, but because the analogies on which my teaching style depends would not reflect the students' new obsessions. Pretending that I shared those obsessions would not work – you cannot fake that sort of thing. I saw immediately that this loss of vocation meant that I would have to leave the university; and I felt dismay.

My dismay sprang from the sense that I would thereby be giving up on politics. For I viewed, and still view, the teaching of philosophy (and history and literature) as an intensely political activity. At the root of all

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serious engagement with what we now call the humanities is the question *What is the good life?* Stimulating interest in that question, stoking the courage required to sustain reflection, is, I still believe, the only way to arouse a passion for justice. And I thought that awakening that passion in individuals, grounding it there in insight, discernment, and empathy, was the only secure route – narrow, but real – to a better, less abusive, less exploitative, polity.

Do I still believe such a polity is possible? I write on the cusp of a dissolution of that faith. And if it is not, then why awaken the soul to justice if the only result can be to increase awareness of the futility of aspiring to justice in the world? Plato's answer is that the acquisition of justice correctly conceived – justice as a right ordering of the intellectual, combative, and appetitive elements of the soul – allows one to bear the futility of politics. But I do not believe this notion of justice adequately captures our intuitions. My own intuitions, at any rate, coincide in a general way with John Rawls's: justice is fairness. And I believe that a passion for justice involves delight in fairness for its own sake, not simply because fairness gets you more of what the fat cats presently have. It depends on an instinct for empathic consideration of situations not one's own, not merely on dispassionate assessment of ways to realize one's interests or to keep the state stable. Ordering one's own soul so that it can withstand mistreatment by one's fellow citizens is a noble aspiration, and one to which I subscribe. But it does not strike me as the acquisition of justice; it strikes me as the acquisition of means to cope with injustice.

In addition to dismay at the recognition that I was no longer capable of meaningful engagement in the classroom, I also felt relief. I did not acknowledge this at the time, but the rapidity, the seamlessness, the joy with which I made the transition to life outside the academy, pointed to it. And as I reflect, I realize that that relief meant the trouble had started before the laptops.

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If you have spent any time in a university classroom built after the Second World War, you will recognize the one I left: a low ceiling of wood-waste panels; fluorescent lighting; cinder-block walls with a thick coat of beige, green, or yellow paint; beige linoleum on the floor; if you are lucky, a strip of windows in narrow aluminum frames; an untidy array of plastic bucket chairs, each with a little laminated pressboard panel on which it is possible to balance either a book or a notebook (or a laptop), but not both; at the front, a chalkboard (usually green) and often, though not always, chalk; and between the chalkboard and the plastic bucket chairs, an ever expanding array of apparatus for “digitizing” the classroom.

I believe Plato's Socrates was right about philosophic method: the first step is learning to think critically about one's inherited opinions – learning to discern that they *are* opinions rather than unquestionable truths; and the second step is learning how to search for solid epistemological ground – how to distinguish good questions from silly ones, how to weigh conflicting intuitions and to understand their roots. I believe Plato's Socrates was also right about the engine driving the second step: it is *eros*, the ungainsayable pull of beauty. It is because we can tell the good life is beautiful that we are able to sustain the hard work of achieving it: if we cannot see its beauty, we descend into skepticism, an eviscerating cynicism about the possibility of meaningful experience. I am not suggesting that the classroom itself constitutes the good life, though that is an old ideal; I am suggesting that if the place where we try to conduct philosophical conversation is a routine and unrelenting assault on the senses, this, in and of itself, demands extra energy of the participants. They must cut through the overburden of cultural acquiescence in bad design, must reach through it to a sensitivity that, in order to cope with the phenomenological assault, has been buried.

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Pierre Hadot, in “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” asks: “Does the philosophical life, then, consist only in the application, at every moment, of well-studied theorems, in order to solve life’s problems?”<sup>2</sup> As the rhetorical structure of the question indicates, his answer is no. He offers an analogy between adopting philosophy as a way of life and artistic creation: “It may seem as though artists, in their creative activity, do nothing but apply rules, yet there is an immeasurable distance between artistic creation and the abstract theory of art. In philosophy, however, we are not dealing with the mere creation of a work of art: the goal is rather to transform *ourselves*.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, we are attempting to induce a conversion experience. I disagree with the suggestion that art aims at the “mere” transformation of materials. Artists, in my experience, are often attempting to respond to the arrival of insight: a sudden, sharp awareness of meaning. Although the scale of such experiences varies greatly, and many are more limited in scope than full-scale religious conversions, that is essentially what the arrival of insight is: a conversion experience. A gestalt of some part of the world shifts. One perceives anew. Art itself can precipitate such a shift in a viewer, and it can be as profound as Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus. Rilke, standing in front of an Archaic torso of Apollo, knew he had to change his life. But I agree with Hadot that in attempting to stimulate genuine and sustained interest in the question *What is the good life?*, a teacher of philosophy is attempting to facilitate just such a conversion experience. Plato was clear about this: standing up and stepping away from unthinking acquiescence in the received views of one’s culture means that the soul must be *turned*. This is frequently a painful business.

Why should anyone agree to undergo this transformation? Here is the mystery: no one does agree. The decision is never rational. It is forced on one. Alkibiades, in *Symposium*, voices his astonishment: “A kind of *madness* comes over me when I listen to Socrates. He makes me feel that my life – *my* life! a life of fame, glory, power, luxury, and the instant gratification of every appetite – is shameful.”<sup>4</sup> That is, inexplicably, Alkibiades’ gestalt of the world undergoes a profound shift in Socrates’ presence. How are such shifts induced? There are many ways: physical abuse, emotional abuse, sustained lying, creating an addiction. None of these, however, is involved in the shift Alkibiades’ experiences. What happens to Alkibiades is like the shift Rilke experiences: he *sees* Socrates’ moral integrity and in the same instant, knows it for the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. He falls in love.

Love, they say, is blind. What is usually meant by this is that erotic desire, rooted solely in another’s physical appearance, can lead us to overlook or deny characterological faults – cruelty, greed, a manipulative style, a tendency to lie. That is why both Plato and Xenophon stress Socrates’ physical ugliness and his lack of social grace: physical beauty and winning ways are not the source of his charisma. Nor is it swagger. Cameron Anderson and his colleagues have shown that human beings repeatedly fall for overconfident males, even when those males demonstrably lack the competence they claim;<sup>5</sup> but Socrates is more like a dishevelled gumshoe than he is like Donald Trump. All he knows is that he does not know much, except about *eros*. What attracts people, against their habitual preferences, is Socrates’ integrity. Our love for this kind of beauty, Plato claims, is the opposite of blind. It leads us to see things, including ourselves, as they really are. Love of integrity produces a shift in our vision of what matters; it shows us what we really want – a kind of security that wealth and fame cannot begin to match. This shift – an awakening to our situation – makes us begin to pay attention to the world.

Are there any guarantees that insight will arrive? That the conversions we undergo will be true? There are none.

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2) Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 268.

3) Ibid.

4) Plato, *Symposium*, 215d–216c.

5) See Anderson, “Why do Dominant Personalities Attain Influence in Face-to-Face Groups?”

This does not mean that all conversions are to false understandings of reality, nor that we cannot, over time, evaluate them accurately.

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My own office was not bad: bare brown brick walls instead of painted cinder block; tough brown wall-to-wall instead of linoleum; and a window, at desk height, that ran the entire width of the west wall and looked out into a large greenspace in the centre of campus. But the demands of the bureaucracy were exploding, both as a result of, and enabled by, the shift to “information technology.” Every month or so there was a new (cumbersome, unintuitive) electronic form or survey designed to increase my accountability. Class sizes were exploding, too. When I first taught an upper-level course in Plato in the mid-90s, it enrolled twenty-eight students – too many, given that Plato’s conception of philosophy involves one-on-one psychogogic conversation rather than lecture-style instruction, but we managed. By the mid-00s, I was being asked to teach two sections of 60 students each. I had argued the proposed cap on my environmental philosophy course from 120 down to 90. And then there was the status of environmental philosophy itself: it was, and still is, regarded by the philosophical industry as an “applied” rather than a “pure” sub-discipline, the sort of course you might offer to the university student body at large, but with which majors are not expected to concern themselves. The idea of such “service” courses is that they provide clarifications of real-life ethical dilemmas by taking a “philosophical approach” to them. But a serious attempt to come to grips with an honest syllabus for such a course will reveal that the challenge flows in the reverse direction: from the nature of environmental problems to our conception of philosophy. For the hegemony of logico-linguistic analysis in the English-speaking tradition and the anthropotelic focus of the post-Kantian poststructuralist tradition are epistemological *symptoms* of the environmental crisis, not methods for solving it. It is an irony that would not have been lost on the author of *Euthyphro*, but one with which I was making little headway in the profession. The pay was great; the pay was staggering. But it was not the job I had signed on for. I now see that my sense that I would not be able to communicate with the laptop-obsessed was simply the most recent addition to a gravitationally challenged pile. It was the whole thing that had collapsed, quite suddenly, that night by the fire. The relief I felt was the relief that comes from ceasing to hold an increasingly distorted posture.

But what was I going to do to make ends meet? I had grown up on a farm. My plan was to leave the city and hire out as a gardener while reserving part of my time to write. Where to go was solved, as my spouse already lived in a rural community; it was in front of his wood stove that I had realized my days in the academy were done. As it turned out, I did not have to hire out as a gardener. I got enough work as a freelance writer, editor, and lecturer to supplement a bit of royalty income. But I did get serious about growing food.

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Hadot writes that for the ancients, philosophy “was a method of spiritual progress ... a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> By “cosmic consciousness” he means “consciousness that we are a part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature.”<sup>7</sup> I would prefer “the consequent dissolution of the self in the intense interconnectedness of nature,” but the basic goal – harmonious coexistence with other-than-human beings – is one

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6) Hadot, “Philosophy as a Way of Life,” 265.

7) *Ibid.*, 266.

that I salute. Living closer to the land has deepened my sense of the fragility and resilience of all beings. One is made daily, effortlessly grateful to be alive.

What, though, of politics?

With constant awareness of death and birth, of flourishing and disease, with physical work, outside, in all weathers, comes not only “cosmic consciousness” but also a certain peace of mind. (At least, in the absence of crises. There are usually several in any given season, but realizing one has survived many and knowing one will not survive them all, helps one to maintain perspective.) Inner freedom, though – freedom from concern about what others may think or do, freedom from concern about what may befall beings that I love – continues to elude me. I have not been able to let go of my desire to see justice in the world. In particular, I have not been able to muster indifference to the fact that members of my species – not just a handful of overconfident males, but the billions glad to see them in power, the billions spoiling for a fight, the millions among the rich and educated who regard overconsumption as a right and will not contemplate restraining their desire to reproduce – are destroying the beauty, the harmony, on which all life depends. I am filled with disbelief, with outrage and despair.

How dare they.

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In 2018, Karen Stenner and Jonathan Haidt published research indicating that “about a third of white respondents across ...twenty-nine liberal democracies proved to be authoritarian to some degree.”<sup>8</sup> In a subsequent interview, Stenner provided the following gloss on “authoritarian”: “a deep-seated, relatively enduring psychological predisposition to prefer – indeed, to demand – obedience and conformity.” She continued:

So the classic conditions that typically activate and aggravate authoritarians – rendering them more racially, morally, and politically intolerant – tend to be perceived loss of respect for/confidence in/obedience to leaders, authorities and institutions, or perceived value conflict and loss of societal consensus/shared beliefs, and/or erosion of racial/cultural/group identity. This is sometimes expressed as a loss of “who we are”/“our way of life”.<sup>9</sup>

This, of course, was meant to help explain Trump’s continuing popularity despite his lying, his cheating, his impeachment, his farcical behaviour on the world stage, and his wholesale disregard for the day-to-day well-being of his supporters (to say nothing of his sexism, his willingness to court White supremacists, and his aspirations to permanent office). But it explains with equal lucidity Socrates’ state execution on fake charges in 399 BCE – and dovetails very precisely with Eric Havelock’s diagnosis in his 1952 essay, “Why Was Socrates Tried?” We do not know the size of the jury, but it was likely 501. If Plato’s statement in *Apology* is correct – that “a switch in only thirty votes” would have acquitted Socrates<sup>10</sup> – then 55% voted for condemnation. Considerably more than a third, but not much more than supported Trump in 2016 and 2020. James Pogue’s “The Art of Losing”, published in the August 2020 issue of *Harper’s*, makes no reference to Stenner and Haidt’s research, but it presents compelling anecdotal evidence that loss of a sense of “who we are” has indeed driven support for Trump.

Reflecting on these observations, I have begun to wonder if Richard Rorty is not right. Perhaps the teaching of philosophy cannot hope to ameliorate injustice, and should not be regarded as anything more than a

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8) Stenner and Haidt, “Authoritarianism Is Not a Momentary Madness, But an Eternal Dynamic Within Liberal Democracies,” 192.

9) Stenner, “Authoritarianism: The Terrifying Trait that Trump Triggers.”

10) Plato, *Apology*, 36a

project of edification. I note that Stenner and Haidt surveyed only Whites. But what if their conclusion pertains to all of us? If somewhere between a third and half of us are characterologically attracted to authoritarian social structures, then there is no point in trying to awaken in everyone a passion for equal opportunity, due process, or the integrity whose achievement is the goal of a philosophic way of life. And for the remaining half or two-thirds? They may appreciate, as I have appreciated, contact with the brilliant, generous, challenging minds whose traces are available in the library; but exposing them to these sources of inspiration will make little difference to the present polity and certainly will not affect the course of history. In some periods, things will change for what some of us feel is the better; but the numbers on the other side mean that it will not take much to tip the scale in the other direction. Enjoy what you can while the wheel of Fortune turns. And follow Epicurus in his principled shunning of politics.

Tu Fu, in the 8th century CE, wrote a poem which in Kenneth Rexroth's translation reads:

It is late in the year;  
Yin and Yang struggle  
In the brief sunlight.  
On the desert mountains  
Frost and snow  
Gleam in the freezing night.  
Past midnight,  
Drums and bugles ring out,  
Violent, cutting the heart.  
Over the Triple Gorge the Milky Way  
Pulsates between the stars.  
The bitter cries of thousands of households  
Can be heard above the noise of battle.  
Everywhere the workers sing wild songs.  
The great heroes and generals of old time  
Are yellow dust forever now.  
Such are the affairs of men.  
Poetry and letters  
Persist in silence and solitude.

This is a brilliant indictment of attempts to effect political reform. The evidence that there is no point in trying is the poem itself: that it speaks to us across twelve centuries and from a wholly different culture. It is also evidence that poetry and letters do persist alongside human injustice and violence. If you are male. If you are female, you likely were not taught to read and write. If you were, your work was likely disparaged or lost or misattributed or you were beaten and locked in your room when you tried or you quit making it when you got married. I can abjure politics and read Plato, but not Aspasia. I can locate many scores by *recherché* male composers, but not important ones by Lili Boulanger, or Elizabeth Maconchy, or Rebecca Clarke, despite the prizes they won when they were alive a few decades ago. John Glubb, in *The Fate of Empires*, noted that the rise of women in the professions immediately preceded the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Abbasid Caliphate, and the British Empire. Empires may not be political structures in which we should acquiesce, but they remain dominant features of the global political landscape. Such are the affairs of sexually dimorphic anthropoid primates.

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Two years before I left the university, I lost the land on which I grew up. My mother needed to move to the city for health reasons and my spouse would not contemplate joining me on the farm. It is one of the hardest decisions I have made. The land was my true parent; it had not only provided the food, air, and water that made the cells of my body, it had also been my refuge and my comfort, gentle, strong, and steadfast, when the humans around me were unable to be those things.

I was therefore utterly astounded by my experience the last time I walked the west field. It was summer, late evening; I was preoccupied with sorrow, choked by the sense I had betrayed my truest friend. And up from the ground, up through the soles of my boots, came the awareness – clearer than speech, like a hand on my shoulder – that the land felt no betrayal, that it loved me and was glad for me to go, that its energy was wild and boundless, unconstrained by human decisions or desire. It is the fact that I could not comprehend what I was sensing – or rather that I comprehended it, but could not *imagine* it – that convinced me what I was picking up was genuine. In that moment, I touched the most potent, the most enduring form of inner freedom. It was not mine. But I was still able to recognize it: a love so enormous, so exuberant that it was unaffected by my failures, or by any of its own possible fates. And I realized I had been afforded a glimpse into what it is, really, to *be*.

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Those of us alive now, those of us in whose lifetimes the earth's human population exploded from a sustainable 2.5 billion to 7.8 billion-and-counting, those of us in whose lifetimes something could have been done to halt the exploitative juggernaut that is driving the climate cataclysm and a sixth mass extinction, we will not live to know whether we merely signed the death warrants of many human cultures, or the death warrant of our species along with those of countless others, or if we managed to allow the destruction of complex life on the planet. Regardless, it is a lot of blood on a lot of hands. And those of us who saw the threat before it was too late, who tried, who tried for decades, either through mass politics or through attempts to turn one soul at a time, are we not entitled to a little despair? Plato, we note, did despair. His last dialogue, *Laws*, is the gesture of a thinker who has given up trying to persuade humans to be good. If he could not bear it, how shall we? Moreover, simply laying down rules, as Plato does in *Laws*, never works. It merely produces one more turn of Fortune's wheel, different faces on top, different heads rolling below.

Despair, it is said, presumes too much. It is ungrateful for the fact that we still draw breath. It takes the self too seriously. It pretends to know that beauty and being both can, and will, die. It is graceless.

I should like not to be graceless or ungrateful. Still: what good did it do to teach? What good has it done since to write? Or to try to live a sustainable life?

Today I received a package in the mail. I did not recognize the name on the return address label. In the package was a number of poems, records of sudden shifts of insight about oak trees, about the author's father, about a stranger's gesture, about deer. A letter accompanying the poems told me that their author had attended a workshop I had given several years ago and that at the time I had encouraged her to take poetry seriously. She was writing to let me know she had heard me, that she had hit a bad patch for a while, but that she had remembered, had started working on the poems again, had written some new ones. She said she wanted me to know she had not given up.

I am remembering that exuberant, unfettered love that surged through the soles of my boots: the land, being. Not sensing ignorance of what might happen, nor that what might happen was irrelevant, but that every-

thing was relevant – the pearl grey of the deer mouse’s ear, the thunderhead to the northwest, the shadow of the Swainson’s hawk that had earlier grazed the fence line, the new harrow parked outside the machine shed, my grief, the gold glint in the ripple on the beaver pond, the rattle in the balsam poplar’s leaves. All of it, all of it, the guillotine, the drop from the helicopter, the slow live dismemberment, the scent of the wild roses on the railway bed, the coda of the second movement of Fauré’s piano trio, every bit of it shot through with meaning. Even planetary ecocide, absorbed in the immensity that is being. Human moral beauty is simply one species, one version of, that ontological integrity. Species go extinct all the time. Being does not. Human evil is nothing more than the transient coalescence of an opposable thumb with characteristics we share with many other species: aggressiveness, territoriality, mammalian compulsion to comply, social organization in dominance hierarchies, anthropoid primate sexual dimorphism. Loss, yes, every second, irretrievable, this beauty gone for good, and gone for good someday my struggle with my desire for justice, and erased, my despair at the erasure of women’s work; and newness, every second too, and new beauty, even if it is the frozen dust of Mars or the brilliance of thermophilic archaea once again spreading across the planet.

Plato’s ghost, are you there? Socrates? Do you hear? I come close some days, but I have not given up.



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