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**KATIE COSTELLO**  
**Mustangs of the USA**

COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY KATIE COSTELLO





Surfer, Kuta beach, Bali. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



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*Live Encounters Magazine* (2010), *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* (2016), *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers* (2019) and now, *Live Encounters Books* (August 2020).

We are appealing for donations to pay for the administrative and technical aspects of the publication. **Please help by donating any amount for this just cause as events are threatening the very future of Live Encounters.**

Om Shanti Shanti Shanti Om

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Katie Costello was born and raised in Hubbard, Ohio, USA. Her greatest passion in life has always been to help animals. She is lucky enough to be a licensed veterinary technician and owner of The Canine Campus Training and Wellness Center where she helps animals through behavior work. A vegetarian since she was 6 years old and a vegan for the last 13 years, she currently has 6 dogs, 6 cats, 8 chickens, 3 roosters 1 very special turkey and 3 farm pigs that are amongst her dearest friends. She is founder of 2 non-profit organizations, K-9's for Compassion (Co-founded with her father), a therapy animal group and The Together 3 Journey, a service dog organization. She has been on the board of many animal organizations throughout her life, including Happy Trails Farm Animal Sanctuary and C.H.A.I.N. (Community Helping Animals In Need) and SVBT (Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians) She enjoys freelance writing about (mostly) animals for different magazines, with her favorite being Live Encounters! <https://thecaninecampustraining.com/>

## KATIE COSTELLO

### MUSTANGS OF THE USA

*Text & Photographs*

Just say the word mustang and it conjures up images of the pioneers, the wild west, the pony express, the days of cowboys and Indians. To me nothing says what it is to be truly American more than a mustang. They are the very image of freedom and land on the range. It also speaks to the special bond that people have with horses. A partnership that has been around for so long the two have forged a road that is inseparable. Yet the plight of the mustang is in danger, and many aren't even aware there is a problem. Over the next few issues, I will be taking a deep dive into the many sides of the problem, and hopefully empowering you to join the revolution to save the wild mustangs, and all free horses everywhere.

Mustangs are still running free in California, Oregon, Utah, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, Montana, South Dakota, Arizona, Texas, Idaho, and New Mexico in the West; and wild (feral) horses are still running free in MD, Virginia, North Carolina, and Georgia. The Interior of Defense Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Manages 179 areas of horses throughout the states in the west.

The definition of a Mustang according to Merriam-Webster is a "small hardy naturalized horse of U.S. western plains directly descended from horses brought in by the Spaniards." There are many other wild herds of horses on the East Coast that are not in danger of being rounded up: however, they do come with their own sets of problems. It should also be noted that while we call mustangs "wild" horses, they are not native to our land, coming of Spanish descent. They are truly "feral" horses from domesticated stock that has been turned out to fend for themselves, even though they have been feral for hundreds of years. It is thought that the mustangs were brought by the Spanish explorers in the 16th century. The word Mustang comes from "Mestengo" or "Mostrenco", meaning wild or masterless cattle.



Katie Costello



There is something called *The Five Freedoms*. These are globally recognized as the gold standard in animal welfare, encompassing both the mental and physical well-being of animals; they include: freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury, and disease; freedom to express normal and natural behavior, and freedom from fear and distress. During the discussions in future issues, we will dance around several of these. You might want to mull over these truths to see where we may be lacking.

I think as anyone masters their craft more, they see many different layers to any perspective problem. This happens naturally and slowly, as you see more and more from the trenches. For me this has evolved in a lifetime of working with animals, and seeing how, for so many people, it is all from our human perspective. We really don't give animals a say in much of anything. We are certain that we know what is best, or we don't care in the first place to look deeper into facts. The meat industry for the most part survives because it is all hidden from view. Most people are only concerned about the food on their plate, not how or what it is that gets them there. We live in this "Us versus them" society, and it allows these thoughts and attitudes to persist, which is a great disadvantage to the animals that we love so deeply.

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I think it is really important to understand how strongly horses bond. Their band is a family. Their stallion will fight to maintain the herd and protect them. The mares and their foals are inseparable. Truly, they form incredibly strong bonds with each other. To separate them is torcher.

### **The Wild Horse and Burro Act**

Taken directly from the Bureau of Land Managements (BLM) webpage we learn how this act came to be. "During the 1950s, Velma B. Johnston, later known as "Wild Horse Annie," became aware of the ruthless and indiscriminate way wild horses were being treated on western rangelands. So-called "mustangers" played a major role in harvesting wild horses for commercial purposes during this time.

Wild Horse Annie led a grassroots campaign, famously involving many school children. Newspapers published articles about the exploitation of wild horses and burros. As noted by the Associated Press on July 15, 1959: "Seldom has an issue touched such a responsive chord."



Member of the Onaqui herd. Photograph by Katie Costello while travelling on the famed Pony Express at Tooelle, Utah.





One of the families of the Onaqui herd. Photograph by Katie Costello while travelling on the famed Pony Express at Tooele, Utah.



So, what happens at these gathers? A helicopter will fly low and scare the horses forcing them to run. They strategically have corrals set up to capture the horses, and as the bands come together because there is safety in numbers, the BLM will release a “Judas” horse that runs into the enclosure and the mustangs often follow into the trap. From there, the pregnant mares and the foals that can’t keep up are often separated. Even the herds that can stay together are separated by sex upon entering the corral. Life as they have always known it is over.

In January 1959, Nevada Rep. Walter Baring introduced a bill prohibiting the use of motorized vehicles to hunt wild horses and burros on public lands. The “Wild Horse Annie Act” became Public Law 86-234 on Sept. 8, 1959, but it did not include Annie’s recommendation that Congress initiate a program to protect, manage and control wild horses and burros.

By 1971, the population of wild horses on public lands had declined significantly because of the encroachment of man and the impact of mustangers.

In response to public outcry, Congress unanimously passed the “Wild Free-Roaming Horses and Burros Act” (Public Law 92-195) to provide for the necessary management, protection and control of wild horses and burros on public lands. President Richard M. Nixon signed the bill into law on December 15, 1971.

Since passage, the Act has been amended by Congress on four different occasions. Read the full, amended text of the law...

[https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/programs\\_wildhorse\\_history\\_doc1.pdf](https://www.blm.gov/sites/blm.gov/files/programs_wildhorse_history_doc1.pdf)

This law means that wild horses and burros are the only two animals in the United States protected by law as national symbols of freedom in our country.

## Gathers

So, what happens at these gathers? A helicopter will fly low and scare the horses forcing them to run. They strategically have corrals set up to capture the horses, and as the bands come together because there is safety in numbers, the BLM will release a “Judas” horse that runs into the enclosure and the mustangs often follow into the trap. From there, the pregnant mares and the foals that can’t keep up are often separated. Even the herds that can stay together are separated by sex upon entering the corral. Life as they have always known it is over. Accidents happen (And are reported in the BLM gather reports, seen here <https://www.blm.gov/programs/whb/utah/2021-onaqui-wild-horse>). It is not uncommon for stallions to break their necks trying to free themselves. At the Onaqui gather in July of 2021 a mare broke her ankle and had to be euthanized. These gathers break up families, are traumatizing, and in one fell swoop these horses lose their freedom. They no longer have any say in their life, which particularly for the stallions is everything.

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Who manages these horses? The BLM, or Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management. More than 60 percent of their \$100 million (Taxpayer dollars) for horse and burro management budget goes to caring for horses that they have rounded up.

Each horse under the care of the BLM, on average, will equal \$50,000 during their lifetime to take care of them. This means they have limited money remaining to pursue innovative measures. One of the future articles will go into much depth about the BLM, how they manage and the reasons they claim the need for the gathers in the first place and speak truth or dispel the myths surrounding this topic. For a preview and more information on the BLM see here <https://www.blm.gov/whb>.

I found an article written by Bruce Nock; PhD entitled “Wild Horses the Stress of Captivity” particularly interesting. You can read the entire article here ... <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59f8c99ff09ca4e7c237d467/t/5a0f433e9140b74a561ea0f4/1510949699449/Wild+Horse+Stress.pdf>.

He explains how “The BLM reported that 20-30 mares “miscarried” in association with the Calico Complex Gather. In addition to the miscarriages, one wonders whether and how many fetuses were resorbed by mares? Fight or flight dictates that digestion comes to a screeching halt as soon as the horse was alarmed. Perfect conditions for the development of intestinal compactions and colic-the #1 killer of horses. The same can be said for the horses reported to be “not adapting to hay.” Of course not! Let’s be honest. It has nothing at all to do with the hay and probably little to do with the change of diet. It’s about being scared out of their wits and the sympathetic tone shutting down processes related to appetite and digestion.

He continues to explain that psychological stress, regardless of the source, also activated the fight-or-flight reaction. That means the bad news for wild horses only begins with the gather. There is the confinement itself, imagine how stressful confinement is particularly in a species that runs for survival to be held within 4 walls of a stable.

There is social unrest and don’t overlook the importance of such things as the loss of or separation from lifelong herd mates, companions, and family. Boredom goes along with captivity and loss of control.



Recently I was able to photograph the Onaqui herd. I can't express in words the beauty of those creatures, or the freedom you felt standing amongst them. I went with Jenn Rogers, one of the founders of RedBirdsTrust, a 501©3 group that helps the mustangs at Onaqui horses. Jenn is very knowledgeable about the horses, and the gathers. The truth of the matter is that ALL the mustangs in the West are in danger of roundup.

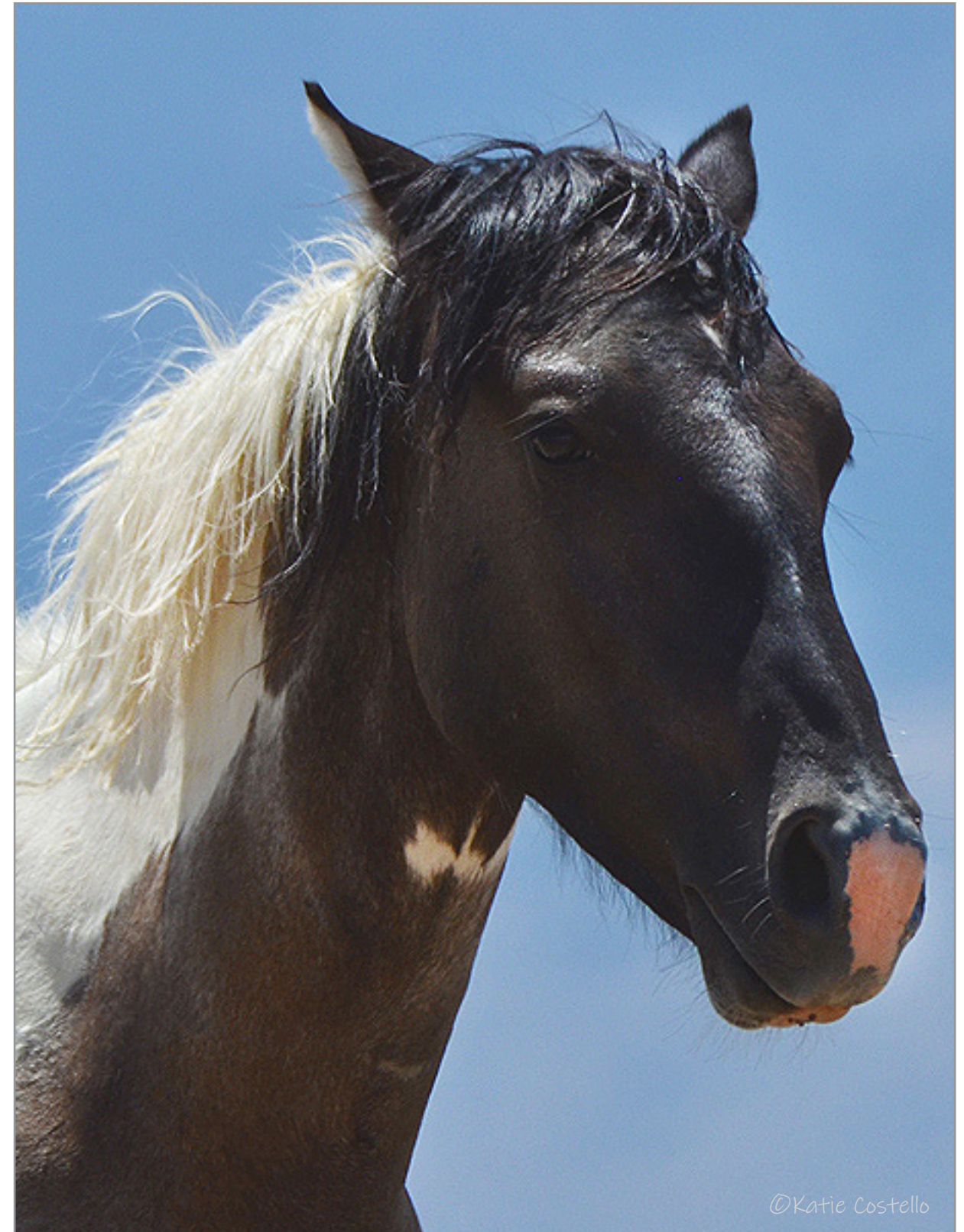
People like Dr. Sue McDonnell and Dr. Catherine Torcivia from University of Pennsylvania are looking for better solutions to gathers. Dr. McDonnell is Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB), Animal Behavior Society Adjunct Professor of Reproductive Behavior, New Bolton Center Clinical Associate, Widener Hospital, University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine and Founding head of the Equine Behavior Program. At the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine they are using drones on a limited study group of horses to see if they can accomplish the same result with much less stress. While more work must be done, preliminary results were looking promising. See more information in this article <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-2615/10/1/80>.

I spoke with Dr. McDonnell who was able to pose the problem in many ways to me. She had personally spoken to Ranchers, BLM cowboys and BLM management all the way through the highest person in Washington overseeing the BLM. People are at such opposing opinions it is hard to really get anything done. She explained how the BLM is in between a rock and a hard place. That they have gathered so many horses and don't have ability to adopt them. All their money is going to taking care of the horses from the gathers, and there isn't money left over for a better solution.

We all have something to learn from one another. The ranchers, the BLM workers, the animal rights groups, the volunteers, they are all important piece of the puzzle and where the answer to this lies. But we all must work together, and accept that we all don't feel the same, but there are still pieces to take away from each person.

Recently I was able to photograph the Onaqui herd. I can't express in words the beauty of those creatures, or the freedom you felt standing amongst them. I went with Jenn Rogers, one of the founders of RedBirdsTrust, a 501©3 group that helps the mustangs at Onaqui horses. Jenn is very knowledgeable about the horses, and the gathers. The truth of the matter is that ALL the mustangs in the West are in danger of roundup. When we first arrived in Utah, loving all animals, I was super excited to see the cattle running free and I couldn't figure out the entire thing at all. As we were there, pieces started to come together. It was a sight to behold, coming from Ohio where we are void of wild horses or free ranging cattle.

Horses are in a class all their own. In other species people have determined it is okay to have "hunting seasons" because things are out of balance, probably because we eliminate all the natural predators.



Member of the Onaqui herd. Photograph by Katie Costello while travelling on the famed Pony Express at Tooelle, Utah.





Member of the Onaqui herd with the Onaqui mountains in the background. Photograph by Katie Costello while travelling on the famed Pony Express at Tooele, Utah.



And my hope is to ignite a fire within each of you to show the importance of the lives of these horses, and their true wildness. To honor them for the beings that they are, and what they stand for. To find truth in ourselves to do what is right, truly right. I am reminded of the speech by Chief Seattle, leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes who said some of the most powerful words I have ever read: *"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect."*

So, we justify these hunts. The problem is that the American public doesn't think it is okay to hunt horses. We don't think it is okay for the horses to go to slaughter for the meat industry. and while BLM feels that there are too many horses for the land to sustain, (even though 8 times as many cattle wander free on the range, called "Welfare ranching", the horses are the problem. So they are gathered and placed on land in hopes of adoption. (This is only one of many reasons that the BLM justifies removal of the horses. The National Academy of Sciences in a report commissioned by the BLM is concerned about gathers contributing to population growth rates. They have urged BLM to adopt the use of an injectable birth control injection called PZP. PZP was first used in the Assateague population in 1988 and has worked very well in controlling and maintaining their herds. However, the land mass is much smaller than on the range. Another problem with PZP is that you must be able to dart the horses every 2 years to be effective. This has been tested in multiple forms on different herds in the west with good results. See entire article here <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/13511/using-science-to-improve-the-blm-wild-horse-and-burro-program>.

One of the many arguments against horses is that they are destroying the land. Yet, wild horses occupy less than 12% of BLM managed lands. Livestock graze on 88% of BLM lands and vastly outnumber mustangs and burros, thus their impacts are exponentially higher.

I am looking very forward to sharing an in depth look at 3 parts to this problem in future issues- BLM's side, Ranchers side, Animal rights side and how to take action to help mustangs on many levels.

This is a topic that I am very passionate about. These horses have admittedly stolen my soul, and I spend every second of vacation that I possibly can in their presence. However, I fully believe that it is important to understand all sides of the problem. It is only when you understand those different opinions that you can truly formulate an educated opinion about any problem. That is my goal with these articles. I want to present you with all sides, to allow you to form an opinion that makes sense to you. And my hope is to ignite a fire within each of you to show the importance of the lives of these horses, and their true wildness. To honor them for the beings that they are, and what they stand for. To find truth in ourselves to do what is right, truly right. I am reminded of the speech by Chief Seattle, leader of the Suquamish and Duwamish Native American tribes who said some of the most powerful words I have ever read: *"Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect."*



Member of the Onaqui herd. Photograph by Katie Costello while travelling on the famed Pony Express at Tooele, Utah.





Mark Ulyseas has served time in advertising as copywriter and creative director selling people things they didn't need, a ghost writer for some years, columnist of a newspaper, a freelance journalist and photo-grapher. In 2009 he created *Live Encounters Magazine*, in Bali, Indonesia. It is a not for profit (adfree) free online magazine featuring leading academics, writers, poets, activists of all hues etc. from around the world. March 2016 saw the launch of its sister publication *Live Encounters Poetry*, which was relaunched as *Live Encounters Poetry & Writing* in March 2017. In February 2019 the third publication was launched, *LE Children Poetry & Writing* (now renamed *Live Encounters Young Poets & Writers*). In August 2020 the fourth publication, *Live Encounters Books*, was launched. He has edited, designed and produced all of *Live Encounters'* 221 publications (till September 2021). Mark's philosophy is that knowledge must be free and shared freely to empower all towards enlightenment. He is the author of three books: *RAINY – My friend & Philosopher*; *Seductive Avatars of Maya – Anthology of Dystopian Lives* and *In Gethsemane: Transcripts of a Journey*. <https://liveencounters.net/mark-ulyseas/> <https://www.amazon.com/Mark-Ulyseas/e/B01FUUQVBG>



## MARK ULYSEAS

### Insaniyat\* - Fraternity in Diversity

*"For it is in giving that we receive."*  
— St. Francis of Assisi

#### Abstract

The world is facing unprecedented hardship due to the pandemic, hate and violence in all forms. Rising intolerance, disinformation and misinformation in the media, where the rich get richer and poor becoming poorer, is threatening to tear societies apart. This groundswell of disturbance has been witnessed in the last one year with devastating effect. In these turbulent times, fraternity surprisingly exists in diversity. People of Faith are reaching out to assist the less fortunate irrespective of their colour, caste or religion. Their work is reflected in their insaniyat. Perhaps it would be these very people who will save humanity from the brink of self-destruction.

Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Love and respect must begin in the family, the nucleus of a society/state. Parents are custodians of society and their contribution to love and respect is imperative for its very survival. They are the foundational teachers. And they are failing now for they are succumbing to the new form of liberalism that is decimating all free thought. *You can't say this, you can't say that.*

## Introduction

In the mid-1970s I was studying in St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, in Pre-University, the mandatory one year before admission to graduate studies. And it was here that I had met many enlightened Jesuit priests, one in particular was Vice Principal Father Huart. One day Father Huart requested me to accompany a priest, who had arrived from the Vatican and was new to the city. I was to show him to his hotel a short distance from the college on Park Street. So off we went.

On the way we passed an emaciated beggar lying on the pavement. Without any hesitation the priest turned back, picked up the beggar in all his filth and instructed me to hail a taxi to take us to Mother Theresa's Home for the Destitute. A few minutes into the drive the beggar died. The priest, who had cradled the beggar's body in his arms, prayed softly. There was much sadness in his voice. When we arrived at the Home the nuns gathered the broken lifeless body, cleaned it and covered the man with fresh linen. The reverence with which they did this startled me. Then they all began to pray and sing. Standing next to the priest was Mother Theresa. Her face lit up with an aura of pure insaniyat.

There was never any talk of caste or religion of the dead beggar. His body was accepted. He was accorded dignity in death. Mother Theresa's actions reflected her Faith. I, on the other hand lacked all these qualities.

The actions of the priest and the nuns at the Home are the embodiment of insaniyat...how we should treat one another regardless of our social position.

This humbling experience left an indelible impression and its effect can still be felt whenever one is confronted with an existential dilemma brought on by a passing bout of alienation of self and the distancing from shared values.

Much has changed since the mid-1970s. The world is now caught in a web, the internet, which connects all and entraps all. And this web is fed by billions of people, each person spewing all kinds of opinions, misinformed and uninformed, that appear to be growing in insidiousness - *us* and *them*, *us* vs. *them* or the now popular trend - *me-me*. This self enforced compartmentalisation of peoples is destroying the ancient natural bridges between cultures and religions. The self incarceration of freedom of thought is fast becoming a reality.

Where do we go from here?

Here are a few thoughts.

I believe that there are six basic pillars of society: *Love, Respect, Non-violence, Forgiveness*, and *Charity* with the cornerstone being *Faith*.

## Love and Respect

Love and respect are two sides of the same coin. How can we love another if we don't respect the person? How can we do this if we don't love and respect ourselves, our bodies?

It is easy to succumb to the baser instincts like hatred and violence. Reason is not an option because many are used to readymade fixes for all their ills. We hate because we fear. We resort to violence because we have dispensed with the cumbersome process of reason. We have taken refuge in our perceived notions of cultural values, twisted to suit individual needs.

The many variants of love and respect originate from our upbringing. At birth a new born is given a slap and from then on parents 'train' their children to obey their commands. There is always a rider - *if you don't do this or that then you will be punished*. Or, in growing instances new age parents indulge their children to a point that crosses the sacred line of parent teacher-child relationship resulting in the child becoming precocious and self-centred. This is more pronounced in single child families.

And when this child becomes an adult, society is faced with yet another aberration.

Love and respect must begin in the family, the nucleus of a society/state. Parents are custodians of society and their contribution to love and respect is imperative for its very survival. They are the foundational teachers. And they are failing now for they are succumbing to the new form of liberalism that is decimating all free thought. *You can't say this, you can't say that.*

All forms of 'political correctness' including the banning of a growing number of words and phrases is hamstringing free and fair debate.



Non-violence in thought, word and deed is an ideal state. But when we add the human factor numerous distortions occur, violence in various forms, which can only be resolved by the simple mechanism of forgiveness. But how do we forgive if we are conditioned from childhood to be exceptional by colour, caste, religion or country? How do we reach across the aisle to embrace a perceived adversary?

Perhaps this liberalism is not really liberalism but another form of fascism? Could it be that we are witnessing the birth of another vicious movement that will engulf the world in mindless war, this time a war for hearts, minds and souls?

We must begin with love for this will remove all shackles of age-old prejudices and hate.

Nelson Mandela couldn't have said it better –

*“No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”<sup>2</sup>*

Unfortunately, amidst the COVID pandemic the voice of love, of respect, of selfless duty is overshadowed by the rising tide of jingoism and a disturbing trend of exceptionalism on one hand and rising social anarchy on the other. The pricing and cornering of the vaccine market, the enforcement of lock down laws without regard to the common people's welfare, their day-to-day survival, presents a disheartening image of the burgeoning power and greed of the *exceptionals*.

Can fraternity survive in this adversity?

### Non-violence & Forgiveness

Non-violence in thought, word and deed is an ideal state. But when we add the human factor numerous distortions occur, violence in various forms, which can only be resolved by the simple mechanism of forgiveness. But how do we forgive if we are conditioned from childhood to be exceptional by colour, caste, religion or country? How do we reach across the aisle to embrace a perceived adversary?

All these factors contribute to the present trends – suspicion of the pandemic and the distrust of authority, fear of a conspiracy of an insidious emerging deep state new world order, and upsurge of right wing nationalism.

With utter disregard for others' lives, people without face masks have taken to the streets to protest their individual rights, thus endangering millions of lives.



©Mark Ulyseas

Living from hand to mouth. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.



Meanwhile medical workers around the world are fighting the deadly battle of saving lives. Thousands of them have already died in the process, exposed to the lethal virus. But this has not stopped politicians and others from using this for their own selfish purposes to attempt one-upmanship on opponents, thereby creating further schisms in society.

We are witnessing these developments across the world.

Resorting to violence, physical and verbal, to achieve one's purpose has now become the rule rather than the exception.

Again, it is conditioning that has blinkered many from seeing a wide-angle picture of what ails society.

Why is it that we cannot remove these blinkers? Is it fear of the unknown or the reluctance to accept the truth of reality, an unsettling reality that we must discard to overcome that which feeds our baser instincts and accept unequivocally the wholesome goodness of non-violence and forgiveness?

Perhaps the heavy burden of historical wrongs contributes to this fear. The litany of '*we must not forget, we must always remember*' continues to fuel hate and promotes a dishonest rendition of Truth. If we continue to teach our children about the historical wrongs how are we going to be able to create a just society, which is non-violent and forgiving?

What we are witnessing today in the media and social media is just this – raucous cries for righting historical wrongs, stretching it to a point where we experience reverse discrimination, thereby reigniting fires of hate and suspicion and starting new ones.

A society creates its own government, a government elected by the people to ensure the smooth and fair functioning of the state. The present state of affairs is alarming. Various societies are at the mercy of their governments that in turn are overshadowed by the power of the transnational corporations.

Increasingly, these elected governments have been digressing from their duty to serve the people. The disdain of exceptionalism exhibited by many in power is truly disheartening. It is as if they have shrugged off the moral responsibility of caring for the people in all aspects during the pandemic.

Perhaps charity begins at home. Could it be that we must first begin to share what we have with our family, relatives and friends? And once we have achieved a level of honesty, then reach out to others to support, possibly our neighbours and those who live on our street? If we don't share a part of the excess wealth that we have, how can we hope to build a just society?

Instead of engaging the people, they are treating them as juveniles who don't understand the pandemic and thus need laws to impose monetary fines for transgressing the pandemic restrictions. These actions have encouraged volatile elements in societies to create violent confrontations with the law. Shouldn't people reach out to support one another, to make peace through non-violent action and seek forgiveness in the event of transgressions without the overbearing interference of big brother?

Is this a deluded suggestion?

### Charity

The essential ingredient of a healthy society is charity - The will of the people to share a part of their wealth with others who are less fortunate so that everyone has shelter, food, clothing, basic education, and more. The pandemic has just added to the woes of the hungry and homeless and those who have lost their jobs. The news report titled "*A Tenth of the World Could Go Hungry While Crops Rot in Fields*" is a telling reminder of the impact of the pandemic.<sup>3</sup>

Further, the poor have become poorer and the rich, richer. In fact, the rich have increased their wealth to \$10.2 trillion dollars during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Are these rich people akin to profiteers during a war?

The sinkholes of disparities are suddenly appearing everywhere. This could result in social revolution. The rumbling of discontent, rightly so, can be seen and heard across cities in the west.

What if the rich shared their profits from the pandemic with the poor? What if the rich followed the example of MacKenzie Scott (ex-wife of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos), author and philanthropist, who has given away more than \$4 billion in the last four months?<sup>5</sup> This may be a pittance in comparison to her total wealth but at least it is a start.

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Perhaps it will be Faith that will bring us all back together as one.

In the meantime, fraternity is all that we have in diversity to survive in a world fragmented by violence, hate and the pandemic.

It will be people of Faith, I hope, that will continue to reach out across the great divide to offer succour for the less fortunate. And through this, perhaps, bring about permanent peace between the peoples of the world.

Faith

In the late seventies on the Old Cadell Road, Mumbai, just short of St. Michael’s Church (Mahim) was a mosque (it is still there). The road was lined with a few restaurants that prepared dal and chapattis for the homeless and those living in slums. The deal was quite simple – anyone could buy chapattis and dal (heavily discounted) to feed the lines of hungry people sitting patiently outside the small restaurants with aluminium plates in hand. Often I would see the rich drive up in their cars and hand over small bundles of currency notes to the restaurant staff who would immediately serve the equivalent in piping hot dal and chapattis to the hungry. This was a social arrangement between humans to care for other humans regardless of their caste or religion. It was a beautiful celebration of insaniyat. I do not know if this practice still exists. But this I know, many religious organisations offer food, shelter, education and more to those who are less fortunate. And this, for me, is Faith in all its magnificence.

This goes back to my encounter with a Catholic priest and Mother Theresa in Kolkata decades ago. It was their Faith that gave them insaniyat. It was their Faith that did not blinker them from being selective in their approach to humanity. In fact it was their Faith that enlightened them to do what they did without seeking any reward or accolade.

Perhaps it will be Faith that will bring us all back together as one.

In the meantime, fraternity is all that we have in diversity to survive in a world fragmented by violence, hate and the pandemic.

It will be people of Faith, I hope, that will continue to reach out across the great divide to offer succour for the less fortunate. And through this, perhaps, bring about permanent peace between the peoples of the world.



Fresh fish on sale. Photograph by Mark Ulyseas.

Foot Notes  
1. The title of this essay is an Urdu word which means humanity, to have humanity.  
2.<https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/2501119-long-walk-to-freedom-the-autobiography-of-nelson-mandela> *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*.  
3. See <https://www.bloombergquint.com/global-economics/hunger-is-threatening-to-kill-more-people-than-covid-this-year>.  
4.See <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/oct/07/covid-19-crisis-boosts-the-fortunes-of-worlds-billionaires>.  
5. See <https://www.npr.org/2020/12/16/947189767/mackenzie-scott-has-donated-more-than-4-billion-in-last-4-months>.



Poet, writer and artist Greta Sykes has published her work in many anthologies. She is a member of London Voices Poetry Group and also produces art work for them. Her new volume of poetry called 'The Shipping News and Other Poems' came out in August 2016. The German translation of her book 'Under charred skies' has now been published in Germany under the title 'Unter verbranntem Himmel' by Eulenspiegel Verlag. She is the chair of the Socialist History Society and has organised joint poetry events for them at the Poetry Café. She is a trained child psychologist and has taught at the Institute of Education, London University, where she is now an associate researcher. Her particular focus is now on women's emancipation and antiquity.

<https://www.gretasykes.com/>

## DR GRETA SYKES

### THE TALIBAN AND TRANS - MISOGYNY, NEW AND OLD FORMS

In August this year a young man shot dead five people in Plymouth, among them his own mother. Only two weeks earlier he had his gun licence and gun returned to him. He was known to use the incel site, men who claim it is women's fault that they are not having any sex. He took revenge on innocent people to satisfy his own Ego. They had to die. Misogyny lives on in many men's minds despite efforts towards equal rights of women. It continues in wage differences, in hate speech, within political Islam with its curtailments of women's rights. It exists in the stories of young children. Both boys and girls tend to have a man as a main character in their writing (New Scientist, August 2021). New forms of misogyny are flowering in trends such as woke culture and the atomisation of identity politics into ever smaller splinters.

Recently we learnt in the news that the UK Green party has a new chair for women, Kathrin Bristow, and that her co-chair, Emma Bateman, was ousted for being 'transphobic'. Kathryn has taken over, calling themselves the 'Chair'. She has removed the rights of women to organise and discuss women's matters claiming 'I have to lock the ability of users to post comments due to the Equality Act.'

Meanwhile, the Taliban, freshly released from three years of the pretend Peace process by the US and its allies, giving them time to tighten up their organisation and, with the US leaving, are ready to use the left-over US equipment heading for Kabul to cut down the rights and freedom of women and others who object to their rigid Islamic control of life in their country. They promise one thing, but people tell us their slaughter and incarceration of women continues unabated.

Two different scenarios, one taking place in the rich world, the other in perhaps the poorest part of the world. What unites them both is the intrinsic attack on the self determination and freedom of women to decide their own fate, their education and their goals in life.



Dr Greta Sykes



Two different scenarios, one taking place in the rich world, the other in perhaps the poorest part of the world. What unites them both is the intrinsic attack on the self determination and freedom of women to decide their own fate, their education and their goals in life.

While four fifth of the world's populations are lucky when they have food and shelter and in the UK the division between rich and poor is worse than it has been for several decades, some people in the Western world are busily creating ever tinier minority campaigns vying for the attention of the media. The latter are only too happy to pick up every snippet of news to make sure discussions and rational debates about inequality don't arise. Not surprisingly, when looking through a university library catalogue under 'feminism' new books appear that specify the direction the issue of women ought to move. It is taken for granted that the need for feminism and fighting for women's rights is passe and out of date.

Men can also give birth; women can delay doing so by freezing their eggs. Sex is there to be defined according to whim, not nature. Some men's toilets have buckets for sanitary towels. Woke and cancel culture help these new directions by engaging in moralising shitstorms which are designed to stop alternative views and calm debates. The example of the Green party is a case in point. Discussion is forbidden.

Moralising instead of formulating rational arguments is the trend of our time.

This leads to outbreaks of relabelling, renaming, removing statues, redefining music, stories, writers, as white or otherwise unacceptable. It is gesture politics. Such politics does not change the deep inequality that now fissures the UK. It has not raised the wages of NHS workers, bus and train drivers and a whole host of other low wage workers. It is a 'feel good' action that permits the person involved feeling on a high moral ground without actually improving anything.

### The Trans in LGBT

Trans stands for people whose sex and gender differ. Some undergo chemical or surgical strategies to change their birth sex. Their publicity vastly exceeds their numbers. It is easy to see why their rise to fame is of concern. In Scotland the new schools' directive states that children must be educated in trans matters. Laurel Hubbard is the first transgender athlete to compete in the Olympics in a different gender category to the one into which she was born.

Trans have more problematic implications. Apparently, it frees humans from the binary of male female. That in most cases chemical and surgical procedures need to be endured seems to matter little. Nature is declared as deficient, an all-too-common viewpoint which leads scientists constantly working on an ever-increasing number of technical or surgical fixes to improve it, waste resources and charge fees for. It is taking place in many fields of science and human endeavour. We are constantly improving soils, vegetables, seeds, but our rate of success is diminishing.

Discussing such changes to one's gender on the BBC a medical professional explained that a person who has grown up for over ten years as a boy will already have a body changed by male hormones. A human metabolism is complex and just lowering the level of testosterone artificially in the body may not make you into a woman, he said. Competing in the women's team, however, will be likely to give you the advantage you need to be victorious.

The notion of universalism, the 99% of features that we all share as human beings, such as showing emotions in the same way all over the world so one can read someone's emotion even if they grew up in a very different culture, is out of favour. Being part of the majority is also out of favour. The pressure from the media and shitstorms leads many to join a minority for social reasons, as not to be left out. Minorities can claim to be discriminated against, appear to be victims in a majority culture. They can set up an NGO and receive funds from people like Soros who are happy to do so.

### Soils become deserts

Trans have more problematic implications. Apparently, it frees humans from the binary of male female. That in most cases chemical and surgical procedures need to be endured seems to matter little. Nature is declared as deficient, an all-too-common viewpoint which leads scientists constantly working on an ever-increasing number of technical or surgical fixes to improve it, waste resources and charge fees for. It is taking place in many fields of science and human endeavour. We are constantly improving soils, vegetables, seeds, but our rate of success is diminishing.

Soils become deserts, vegetables become tasteless and seeds are turned into terminator seeds where the farmer has no rights to grow from their own harvest. It has led us to the point where we are about to wreck the planet with our manipulations.

Unlike computers and machines generally we are part of nature, and nature is complex and dynamic, not binary. Among women there exists a multitude of differences – from petite feminine to muscular male looking – as there exists among men, from slim feminine appearance to muscular macho appearance. It suggests that we don't need to operate or take chemicals to become different we are all different. Maleness and femaleness exist in a colourful variety all by nature. Under Hinduism the Hijra celebrate their diversity of hermaphrodites, eunuchs and others as a sacred mythological aspect of nature.



### Goddesses of fertility and laughter

In the ancient world of Mesopotamia, we know there existed eunuchs, men, women, people who chose not to have sex, or to have sex with men and women or women only. This is not something needing to be invented or surgically produced. It happened as part of a natural development of a civilisation that became highly complex and creative. (Greta Sykes 'The defeat of Gilgamesh', 2020) my second novel, portrays all these aspects existing in ancient Iraq and Syria.

Most ancient societies had fertility goddesses, such as Hera, Cybele, or Demeter going back 60,000 years. While men and women are each individually uniquely male or female, women have the capacity for fertility, something men are not born to have. All of nature was celebrated for its fertility and rituals were set up throughout a year to honour the ability of nature to reproduce and humans lived in harmony with nature.

In Ancient Greece most tribes were matriarchic. Generations grew up being named after the mother in the female line. Even today some cultures maintain female control over wealth and land. The rights of women are closely aligned with equality in a society, that is the more rights women have the more equal is the society and vice versa.

Over the last two thousand years the status of women has gone up and down. The old matriarchic customs were based on a common culture and a sense of belonging. They were full of life, laughter and enjoyment. Sexual activity was not punished whichever way it was conducted.

The laughter, however, has gone out of Woke, Trans and the Green party's women's forum. The belonging has gone out of it. It has all become very serious and involves strict laws to keep people from saying things easily and freely or humorously. Similarly, laughter and happiness are leaving all those places where the Taliban erect their constitution of many sins and many laws. Warrior worship conquered matriarchic societies due to the easy access to rape and pillage, goods and slaves.

Today, in India and Pakistan young women frequently refuse to dress as women and instead wear men's clothing and act and behave as men do. The reason is obvious. Women are treated as inferior citizens, often endure domestic abuse, suffer from frequent child birth and hard labour.



Photograph courtesy By USAID - USAID Bangladesh, Public Domain,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=35623308>



During the decades of Socialism in the GDR (German Democratic Republic) women and men had a high level of equal rights. Godhsee writes in her book 'Sex is better under socialism' (2019)

"Socialists have long understood that creating equity between men and women despite their biological sex differences requires collective forms of support for child rearing," she writes. In East Germany, for example, the state supported integrating women into the workforce with policies that subsidised housing, children's clothing, groceries and childcare. This support also meant that women could more easily consider having children without waiting for marriage.

### The burning planet

This year the global warming events with fires and floods has brought home to everyone that humans are destroying the very home we live in. The recent report by the IPPC called their report 'code red' for high alert. In order to stop the destruction, we need every person and every organisation and government to make immediate changes to how waste and fossil fuels are used. We have reached the end point of male warrior fantasies of rape and pillage.

Women have begun to shape much of our Western world through fighting for equal rights and higher status and respect. It is uncanny that just at the moment when more women in parts of the world are gaining more rights small groups of men and women are demanding the right to relabel themselves as being of a different sex than how they were born.

A friend recently reported to me that in one London establishment women's toilets has been turned into male and female toilets, while the men's toilet remained only for men. A safe space for women to go to the toilet has been removed. Not surprisingly, people who work with children feel concerned for their wellbeing and some countries (Hungary) have drawn up laws that prevent early indoctrination into the existence of transgender strategies.

Why is this the case? Because in an already confusing and chaotic society that is unequal with a low sense of belonging, the mere consideration of having to make up one's mind as to what gender one would like to have, as if it was a matter of going shopping, is a burden too far. Choices is a tool to keep profits and sales going up and thus is endangering the planet.

The Taliban are believers in the strictest Islamic rules, meaning no music apart from Islamic music, strict rules for conduct at home or outdoors. Women's rights over their own body their own sexuality, abortion, contraception is strictly forbidden. They must wear veils, burkas, not go to school or university, not work, be locked into their own home and have little outdoor life. Reinforcements of their rules no mercy and appeals to human rights are pointless. They include cutting off heads, beatings, throwing acid in women's faces, cutting of hands, running vehicles over people, knifing citizens.

Researchers found that children prefer to write about a boy as a main character (New Scientist August 2021)? Why? It is because most stories, films and adventures have a male as the main protagonist. It means all girls learn that a man is more important than a woman. Now women's toilets are open to men as well. Trans people may choose to become men to become more powerful. However, in the world of sport men will tend to chose to become a woman to give them the extra edge. Similar to the end of history, The Trans group come close to declare the end of women, as we know them and whose rights we fought for.

Women are now no more than accidentally gendered females in a male world still focused on rape and pillage and deeply unequal. The artificial manipulation with our human beingness is not just a trap to make money out of people, but also a contempt of nature. It is a media campaign to focus our attention on our individuality, rather than on us as a species with 99% of common characteristics who need to unite to fight erroneous and dangerous ideologies and culture/woke culture wars that mislead.

### The Taliban

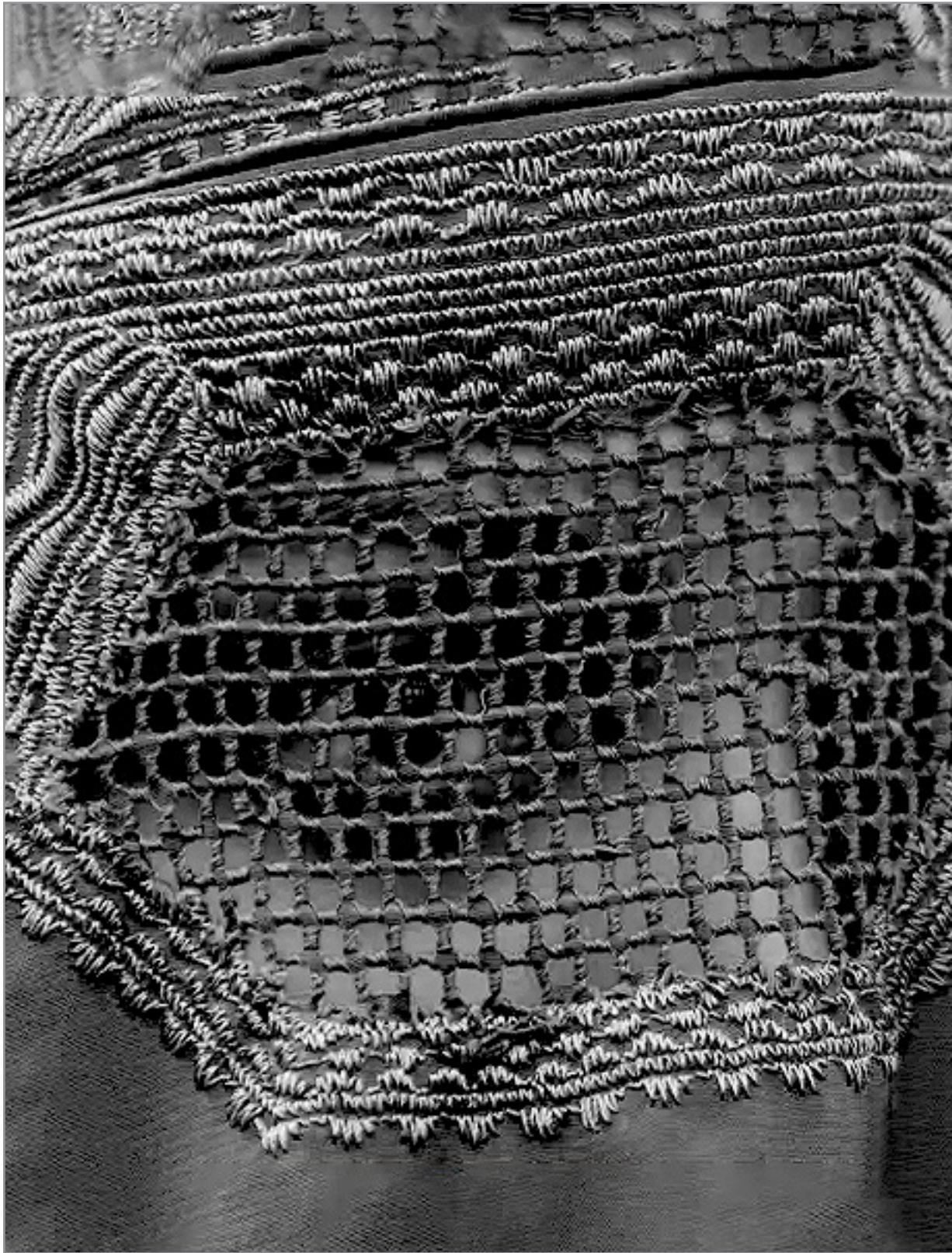
From the early 1980s the CIA handed over billions of dollars to warlords in Afghanistan like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. They were notorious for throwing acid on female students' faces in order to topple the Soviet backed government that tried to provide women with free education.

After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre in New York the US decided that the perpetrators came from Afghanistan and their bombing campaign against the Taliban began. The Taliban are believers in the strictest Islamic rules, meaning no music apart from Islamic music, strict rules for conduct at home or outdoors.

Women's rights over their own body their own sexuality, abortion, contraception is strictly forbidden. They must wear veils, burkas, not go to school or university, not work, be locked into their own home and have little outdoor life. Reinforcements of their rules no mercy and appeals to human rights are pointless. They include cutting off heads, beatings, throwing acid in women's faces, cutting of hands, running vehicles over people, knifing citizens.

Their ideology includes an extreme form of iconoclasm. Art works, architectural buildings, all types of images are destroyed during their campaigns.





Photograph © Fayaz Aziz/Reuters.



"We're living through the most misogynistic period I've experienced." J K Rowling (Photo source: JK Rowling/ Facebook)

### Taliban and Trans misogyny

While the Taliban and Trans focus on women takes different forms, one an ancient warrior glory fantasy, the other a product of late capitalism's cultural flight into splinter groups, they achieve similar results, some intentional others unintentional. They both form an ideological campaign against women's rights over their own body. Women are the subjects of outside agencies that wish to determine their life, their freedom, their sexuality. Primo Levi comments:

*'Every age has its own Fascism, and we see the warning signs wherever the concentration of power denies citizens the possibility and the means of expressing and acting on their free will. There are many ways of reaching this point, not just through the terror of police intimidation, but by denying and distorting information, by undermining systems of justice, by paralysing the education system...'*

We see in both Taliban and Trans fascistoid developments. Splinter groups in the West and Taliban barbarity in poorest parts of the world are both maintained by the stranglehold of the arms industry which is maintaining inequality and poverty all over the world. People's taxes are used to feed the weapons manufacturing. Without them the Taliban could not fight. Splinter groups who don't have support from the media would die back. We could focus on our real enemy. The arms manufacturers and their constant drift into war. We could focus on inequality and finally get rid of it.

Carlo Levi's in his book 'Christ stopped at Eboli' (1941) shows us the darkness that we have entered with the class struggle deeper than ever with one percent of the people owning ninety-nine percent of the world's riches. A world where wars are threatened upon us on a daily basis in our media and the weapons industry is flourishing as never before. A world where nature and the spiritual are being destroyed. The Fascism of our time is visible to those who are closely looking. Carlo Levi speaks to us with the language of a poet to remind us of our sense of freedom and compassion as creatures of nature.



David Morgan is a journalist and editor who is interested in exploring the connections between literature and history. He is the author of *The Good Old Cause – Communist Intellectuals and the English Radical Tradition*, (2020) and co-author of *Writers of the Left in an Age of Extremes* (2021) both published by the Socialist History Society, of which he is the secretary. He also writes poetry occasionally.



## DAVID MORGAN

### WHY HUMANITY NEEDS TO WAKE UP

In a lecture of 1996, the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, addressing the burning question of identity politics that had come to dominate political discussions since the 1960s, related its emergence to “the extraordinarily rapid and profound upheavals and transformations of human society in the third quarter of this [twentieth] century”. Hobsbawm was particularly concerned with how identity politics conflicted with the aspiration towards universalism which until that time was the accepted principle that had guided the long tradition of radical political thinking and progressive social movements. This said that all of humanity was going to be free one day and we would all live in harmony with equal rights and even an equality of social condition. That was, perhaps, little more than a Utopian dream, but it fired the imaginations of many generations and inspired men and women to struggle for a better world over many decades and across the world.

The dilemmas and limitations arising from identity politics of which Hobsbawm spoke and wrote about are very much still our contemporary concerns and, with the arrival of transgender identities, the issues that he raised have become more acutely relevant and more urgent. Transgender demands conflict with the traditional demands of the women’s movement too, for example, and the confrontational politics that marks much of transgender activism leads to the further fragmentation of the vital political struggle for human liberation.

David Morgan



Mother earth cries out for our help while we indulge ourselves in increasingly bizarre trivialities. The true priorities were lost in the mist of time somewhere. Humanity has lost its way. The question today is not, “Is the future female?” but “Is there a future at all?” Unless we soon break the spell of enchantment that controls our behaviour, the answer to this question will be a resounding negative.

This dilemma compels us to question the very foundations of social organisation and the role of the individual within a future free society. The demands for transgender rights cut right across those of the needs of women who are vulnerable to sexual abuse and facing coercive pressures from violent partners and families. The very existence of safe spaces and refuge centres for these abused women are called into question by granting full rights to the demands of transgender activists, who it needs to be acknowledged represent a miniscule but vociferous group within the whole population of any community.

Returning to Hobsbawm, who in his lecture went on to challenge the claims of identity politics and questioned the implications for political action and social advance:

“So, what does identity politics have to do with the Left? Let me state firmly what should not need restating. The political project of the Left is universalist: it is for all human beings. However, we interpret the words, it isn’t liberty for shareholders or blacks, but for everybody. It isn’t equality for all members of the Garrick Club or the handicapped, but for everybody. It is not fraternity only for old Etonians or gays, but for everybody. And identity politics is essentially not for everybody but for the members of a specific group only. This is perfectly evident in the case of ethnic or nationalist movements. Zionist Jewish nationalism, whether we sympathize with it or not, is exclusively about Jews, and hang—or rather bomb—the rest. All nationalisms are. The nationalist claim that they are for everyone’s right to self-determination is bogus. That is why the Left cannot base itself on identity politics. It has a wider agenda.”

Hobsbawm was being deliberately provocative to reinforce his points, but his arguments were extremely valid. He simply wanted to alert us all to what is being lost in the pursuit of identity politics: which was “the common interest”. I need not add that in the age of climate change and the threat to the very existence of human life on earth, this common interest has arguably become far more urgent over the subsequent decades.

Hobsbawm illustrated his point by reference to the example of the history of the civil rights movement in the United States, reminding us that, “the common interest of Irish, Italian, Jewish and black Americans in the Democratic Party did not derive from their particular ethnicities, even though realistic politicians paid their respects to these. What united them was the hunger for equality and social justice, and a programme believed capable of advancing both.”

It is this “common interest” that Hobsbawm saw as having been increasingly forgotten by political campaigners in the late twentieth century, especially those on the left, “as they dive head first into the deep waters of identity politics”. It is a warning we ignore at our peril.

Now, in the subsequent three decades since Hobsbawm was making his observations on the political scene, the trends that he identified have been exacerbated by leaps and bounds. Politics is now far more fragmented and fractious and, as such, the hopes and dreams of past generations of political campaigners have dissipated. To even raise demands for the recognition of common interests and respect for different points of view now generally receive an extremely unsympathetic hearing. There has been a worrying growth of intolerance as minorities have sought to dominate public debates and set the political agenda based in their sectional demands. Dissenters are regularly pilloried and “no-platformed”, as a general ignorance appears to prevail over all discussions, even those that take place in the setting of the university seminar where you would expect the free play of ideas to be aired without fear of being circumscribed by the censorious.

As a consequence of all this, the voices of women, as well as those of men, are increasingly silenced. Those who have the temerity to challenge such issues as transgender rights are quickly punished, banished and belittled. Threats and intimidations are rarely far away. Free debate is seen as intrinsically suspect, the past is defined as the enemy because past behaviour and attitudes fail to conform to contemporary values, awkward aspects of history are erased because they are too unsettling to confront and understand. A narcissistic self-indulgence has taken hold of people’s consciousness and determines what is permitted and valued. Those who raise objections are simply made to feel that they are beyond redemption. It is as if there are no safe spaces for anyone with eccentric or critical views any longer. We all must keep our heads down, bite our tongues and remain mute in the face of galloping idiocy.

That is a form of intimidation, and all the while, our planet is burning. Mother earth cries out for our help while we indulge ourselves in increasingly bizarre trivialities. The true priorities were lost in the mist of time somewhere. Humanity has lost its way. The question today is not, “Is the future female?” but “Is there a future at all?” Unless we soon break the spell of enchantment that controls our behaviour, the answer to this question will be a resounding negative.

Foot Note  
Eric Hobsbawm, Identity Politics and the Left, New Left Review, Number 127, May/June 1996, the text of his Barry Amiel and Norman Melburn Trust Lecture originally delivered at the Institute of Education, London on 2 May 1996.



Born in Munich 1954. 1973 studied with Ernst Fuchs and Salvador Dali. 1970 he painted *still-lives* in Switzerland introducing curved mirrors which reflect objects in most surprising ways and led to a proposal for the –elegant Universe. Moving to Tuscany in 1980 landscape and atmospheric effects crystallized to intense, portraits of nature. Since 1984 living in Bali. In his search for the- abstract. Papua New Guinea – Warriors combine the archaic with the futuristic. Wolfgang's motto – aesthetic = ethic – points to places where humans experience the Good, the True and the Beautiful.



## WOLFGANG WIDMOSER

### LANDSCAPES OF TUSCANY

*Artwork & Text*

I had the great privilege to live in Tuscany for 12 years.  
 My house was an excellently build sheep stable with thick carved stone walls.  
 Surrounded by Nature it had a breathtaking view  
 of the valleys below that stretched to the Mediterranean Sea.  
 An ideal place for a landscape painter,  
 I could observe my model from the studio window -  
 A pastoral landscape with 2000-year-old olive trees and Etruscan graves,  
 abandoned villages and decayed Roman villas.  
 It seemed not much had changed in the last 3000 years.  
 From the emerald meadows of spring  
 to the bright yellow cornfields in Summer one could observe  
 a vast variety of colors and atmospheres.  
 Based in the pink evening light one was transported to a mythological time.  
 Many cultures have passed through but Tuscany never lost its identity.  
 Renaissance sprang from this holy land inspiring the world throughout the ages.

Wolfgang Widmoser



**The Storm** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas - 100 x 125cm







**Le rocce dei spiriti** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas - 130 x 85cm



**Fenile** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas - 80 x 100cm



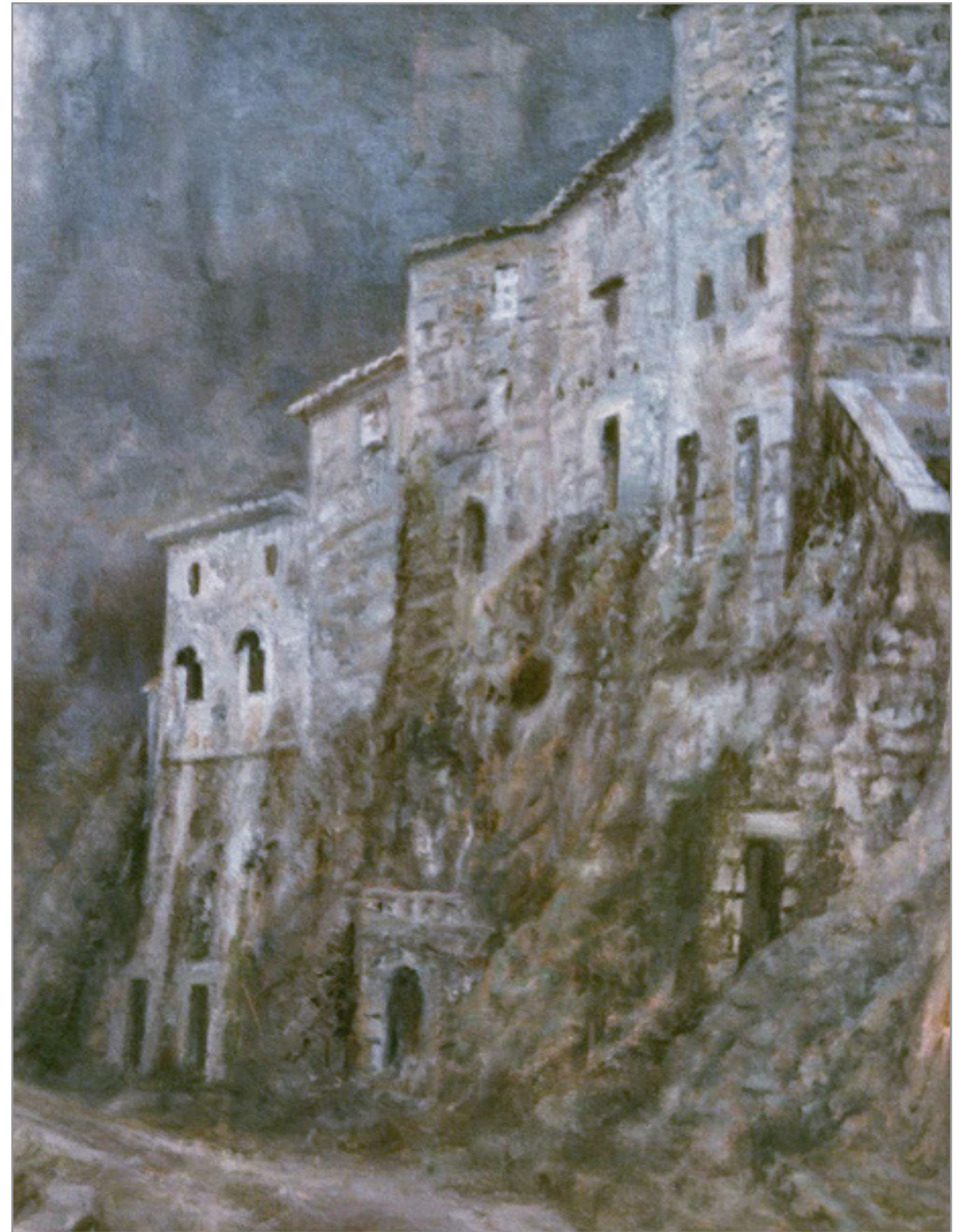




**La strada** - Tuscany1985 - oil on canvas 100 x 80cm



**Pitigliano** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas - 80 x 100cm



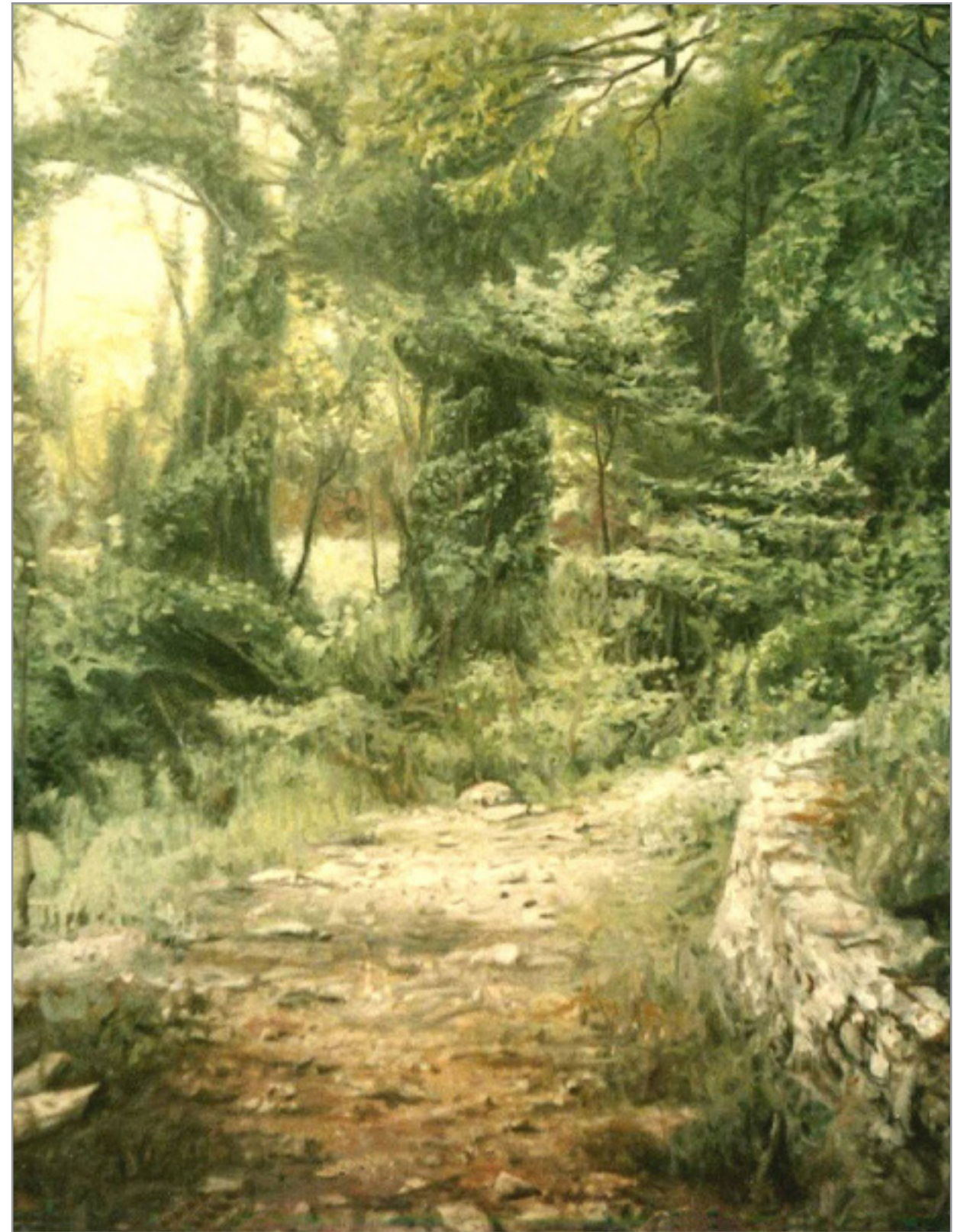


**La Paicca** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas 100 x 125cm





**Sentiero** - Tuscany 1986 - oil on canvas 100 x 125cm





**Giglio** - Tuscany 1982-86 - oil on canvas - 80 x 100cm







**Giglio** - Tuscany 1987 - oil on canvas 50 x 40cm



Percy Aaron is an ESL teacher at Vientiane College in the Lao PDR and a freelance editor for a number of international organisations. He has had published a number of short stories, edited three books and was editor of *Champa Holidays*, the Lao Airlines in-flight magazine and *Oh!* - a Southeast Asia-centric travel and culture publication. As lead writer for the Lao Business Forum, he was also on the World Bank's panel of editors. Before unleashing his ignorance on his students, he was an entrepreneur, a director with Omega and Swatch in their India operations and an architectural draughtsman. He has answers to most of the world's problems and is the epitome of the 'Argumentative Indian'. He can be contacted at [percy.aaron@gmail.com](mailto:percy.aaron@gmail.com)



## PERCY AARON

### The Homecoming

*Phet is crouched in the deepest interior of cave, eyes wide with fear. Resting his head against his father's knee, he watches his five-year old twin, unafraid as always, playing catch-me-if-you can with some of the other village children. All around them people are screaming as they climb over those squatting near the entrance. Villagers who have found places are urging the stragglers to move faster. The cave is full but still they make place for the laggards. A dog, its tail tucked between its legs, is burrowing under the crouching bodies. Phet sees his grandmother at the mouth of the cave, hobbling inside on the arm of his aunt. The younger woman looks back anxiously; backwards, upwards. His mother pulls him and his father into another tunnel trying to create room where none is possible.*

*Then a blinding light and an ear-splitting explosion fills the cave with dust and debris. The next minute, his aunt, his grandmother and several others are just blood, bones and brains splattered over the rocks at the entrance. There is no time to grieve, or even scream. As the fires start, his mother grabs his hand. His father picks up another sibling, and they run, stepping into the crimson human pulp. All around them the cave is emptying as quickly as it filled up.*

*In the sky the warplane circles like a vulture observing carrion from above. As the villagers rush to the open rice fields, it turns around and dips down, slowing for a strafing run. Phet's father stops and holds up his hand, they won't make it, which right now is a good thing. In slow motion, they watch the plane's machine guns stitching the shallow water of the rice fields, turning it from brown to red.*

*The next day the old man returns to work, breaking his back in his little rice field. Despite the deaths the previous day, grieving is an unaffordable luxury when so many mouths remain to be fed. But a few nights later, over a rusty mug filled with the locally brewed rice wine, the tears come for his mother, his sister and his son Thip, Phet's twin.*

Percy Aaron





Entrance to Tam Piu Cave. © Photograph by Martin Rathie.



Since that fateful day, life had moved on. Things were still difficult for most villagers. There was still the constant hunger but at least there was peace - some kind of peace. Now at least, those big birds in the sky no longer rained death and indiscriminate destruction.

True, most promises weren't kept and there was no end to the sacrifices being demanded. True, some people were expected to sacrifice so much more than others. Villagers who were close to the important people visiting from the towns, always seemed to have more for doing so much less. The village chief spent less time in the fields and more time assembling them after a hard day's work exhorting them to grow more food. The exhortations were always the same: work harder; give more; be patient; and always be vigilant, especially of the enemies in their midst. Phet's father was really confused. Usually, the enemies were those villagers who cared and shared the most. Those who had fought hardest during the revolution, were now the 'enemies in our midst'. The old man couldn't understand. Most times there was never enough food in the village and yet when these people from the towns arrived, the food and drink were plentiful, at least at their table. On each visit, they took away more than half the rice and vegetables grown by the villagers. They were taking away the food to distribute to others who had nothing, they said but it was difficult to imagine any village having less food than this one.

About five years ago, Bounmy his friend, had asked these important people if he could accompany them as they distributed the food to distant villages. He went off with them, very excited at the opportunity to ride in a truck. But he didn't return and later they told him that he was working for the Party in another part of the country. Selfish Bounmy, not even keeping in touch with his elderly mother. On another visit, Kham the hardest working of them all, had pointed out to these important visitors that they looked healthier and stronger than any of the scrawny villagers and maybe they should stop making speeches and help in the fields. A few mornings later, a couple of them came back and took him away to meet the big chief in the capital. Now more than three years later, he hadn't returned to his struggling wife and three children. The village headman said that he had met another woman, much younger than his wife, and married her. So it was always with those complaining: leaving without even saying goodbye to family and friends.

As the years went by, life began to ease for some villagers. A few had relatives overseas, people who had left before or during the war. Now they sent back money or parcels. Then a message would come from the town and the lucky ones would journey to the post office there.

True they had to part with almost half of what they received but they never grudged this as it was going to help those villages that had even less. The village headman took a cut too, but that was because he gave the villager a lift into town on his dilapidated motorbike. Despite having to give away almost two-thirds of what was received, there was always enough for a few chickens to share with friends. Gradually, some homes started acquiring bicycles and transistors.

Occasionally a visitor would arrive from these faraway lands to see relatives, trace their roots, and even to marry a local girl. Then they would pay for the slaughter of a pig or two and the whole village would be invited to party.

Early this year a man arrived from America looking for a bride from this village. As always with these visitors, he wanted to impress the local people by being generous with his food and drink. Each night the villagers got together with this Lao-American, sharing his bourbon or offering their homemade brew. The prospective groom, twice divorced, was in his late fifties. While the bride-to-be was just nineteen. But she was beautiful and her impoverished family could do with the handsome dowry promised. One night, after the liquor had taken effect the reminiscing began. Family histories were related, roots traced and ghosts from the past resurrected. Stories from the war were told and retold and those who had died were remembered. But of so many, there was no trace. Most families had paid a heavy price.

Then one night the visitor mentioned a colleague from the same factory back in Minnesota who had lost his whole family in the caves that day the warplane had come. A stranger had grabbed the five-year old's hand and run, not letting go. And she hadn't let go even after crossing the border into Thailand, not through all the years in refugee camps, or later in wintry Minneapolis. Aunt Mai had adopted the little boy and cared for him all the years, until the cancer got her last year.

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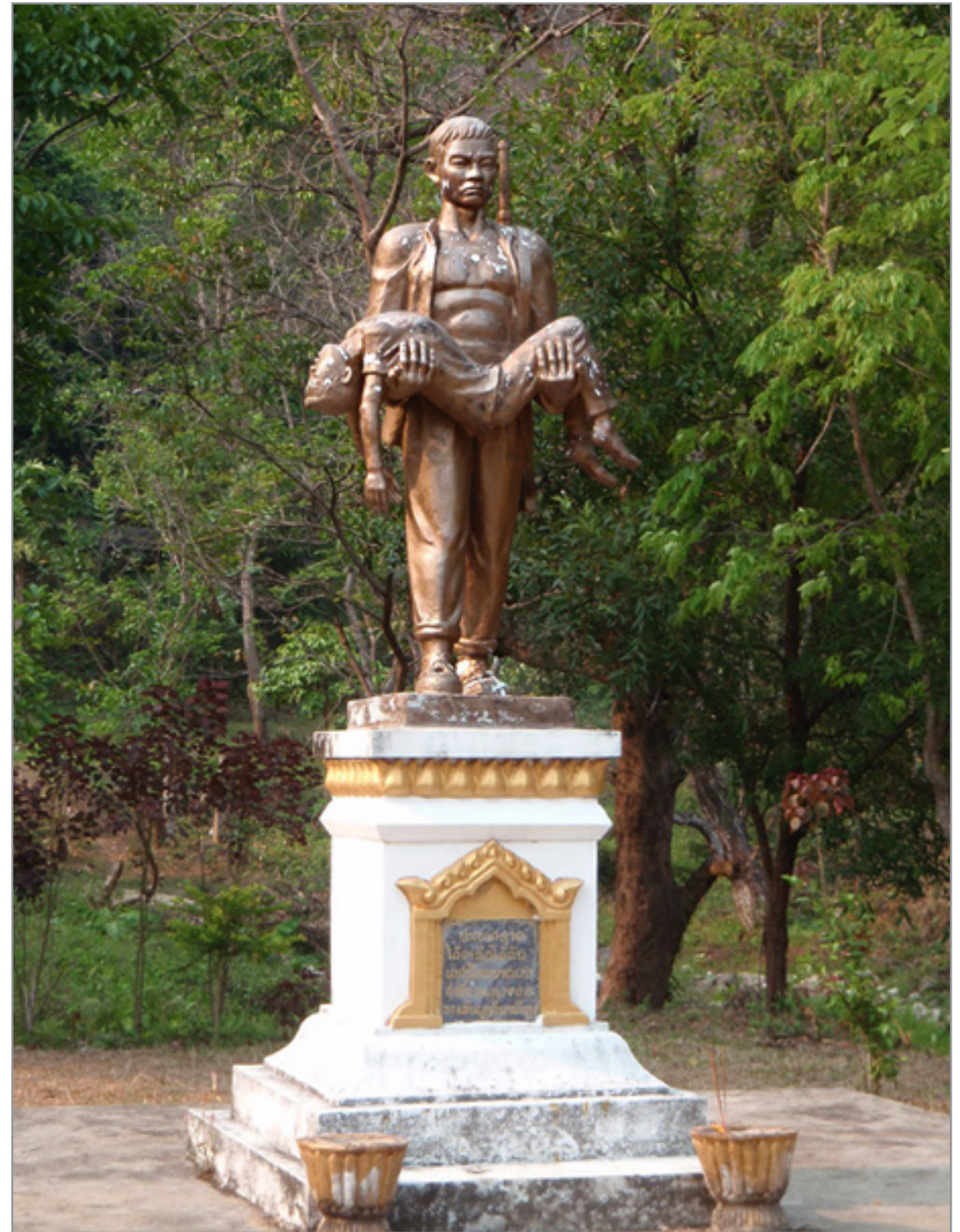
Down from the mountains they came and after two days of arduous travel, Phet and his family finally arrived in the capital, Vientiane. Now they were at Wattay International Airport in their finest tatters. Phet, his parents and his three sisters went up to the observation deck while their children went up and down in the lift, pressing numbers at random. After a while, somebody spotted a plane in the sky, and a shout went out. Phet looked into the sky and squinted as the giant silver bird descended. Then memories from thirty years ago came flashing back. He started to shake uncontrollably. His frail old father held his arm, not knowing whether it was excitement, or just his son's recurring malaria. Steadying himself against the railing Phet pulled up his shirt and wiped his forehead. He choked back a scream and gripped his father's arm tightly.

The panic subsided by the time the screaming monster taxied to a stop on the tarmac. Phet's sisters were giggling nervously while their children, bored with the lift, were gaping at the big bird now spitting out tiny dolls of men and women. From the distance, he watched the passengers walking towards the terminal clutching bags or bundles in their hands. He stared hard at all the men but couldn't identify his twin, despite all the photographs exchanged since contact had first been made.

They took the lift to the ground floor and Phet saw the crowds milling around the Arrivals gate. His mother pushed through the throng, her tiny frame slipping between the people in front of her. His sisters, already teary eyed, struggled not to burst with emotion in front of these slick city folk. His father, too scared to go to the toilet in case his son disappeared for another thirty years, had wet his trousers. He didn't look well at all.

Phet didn't know how he would react when he met his twin face-to-face. Even at five, his brother had been his hero, his universe.

Then Phet saw his mother being hugged by a muscular, handsome lookalike. From behind the crowds, he could hear her shouting, crying. His sisters were rushing towards their long-lost baby brother. As he helped his father forward, the old man stumbled. Phet struggled to hold him upright, then saw his father, eyes closed clutching his chest.



Memorial to the victims. © Photograph by Martin Rathie.



2010 - 2020

11  
YEARS

Live  
encounters

FREE ONLINE MAGAZINE FROM VILLAGE EARTH  
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