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Nurturing Autonomy

Jamie Heckert

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There's a story, you may have heard it. It has many forms and goes something like this. Some people are powerful. *They* are the ones in charge, in control. *They* make things happen. If you or me or anyone else who isn't rich, isn't powerful wants to see things change, we have to ask them to make changes for us. The other side of this story is that we, that you and I, are powerless. Do you tell yourself this story? I do, sometimes. It's just the way things are. There's nothing we can do. Those are the rules.

Sound familiar?

The thing is, these are just stories. I know they are not true.

Don't get me wrong, I love stories. One of my favourite is writers, Ursula Le Guin, once wrote 'All of us have to learn how to invent our lives, make them up, imagine them. We need to be taught these skills; we need guides to show us how. If we don't, our lives get made up for us by other people'.¹ The guides, for her, are stories. With other stories, we might imagine other possibilities. 'Another world is possible', says the global justice

¹ Le Guin, Ursula K. 2004. 'The Operating Instructions' in *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, the Reader, and the Imagination*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

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movement. Another Dorset is possible, too. Another you. Another me.

How do I know this? Observing nature, I see only change. Life is a continuous cycle of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth. And when I say nature, I include human nature. We too are nature; we too change.

How will we change? What does the future hold? I don't know. I do know that far more is possible than we are led to believe, then we lead ourselves to believe.

I remember an experience I had in a yoga class. The instructor was inviting me to try a new posture. I told him I couldn't, that I wasn't that strong. In my mind's image of myself, I was weak. He smiled and encouraged me to try. To my astonishment and exhilaration, I did it.²

Have you had an experience like that? Have you ever surprised yourself, discovering you are capable of more than you realised? If so, you know what I mean. And if you haven't, would you like to?

* * *

On a train home from London one afternoon, two young men boarded in the New Forest and sat opposite me. They spoke loudly, sharing stories of military training. In these stories, they described pushing their injured bodies, following orders. I felt such pain imagining myself in these situations and was moved to respond.

'Hey, lads, can I ask you a question?'

'Yes.' An immediate response. Were they telling these stories loudly because they were eager to be listened to?

'I feel confused hearing your stories,' I said. 'They sound to me like torture and yet you sound proud at the same time. Can you help me understand?'

² See integralyogadorset.org

The young man on the right gave me a series of slogans that, I imagined, he had been fed by his so-called superiors. ‘Pain is temporary, pride is forever’ and something about wanting to be ‘the best’.

‘Ah, thank you – I understand a bit better now. That’s interesting to me because it’s so different from my own perspective. I’m inspired by the anarchist tradition and part of that is learning to listen to your own body, to your own authority. Who is this guy who convinces you to hurt yourself based on his idea of the best? It seems to me he’s trying to break your spirit, to teach you obedience.’

The young man on the left side, slowly, ‘I think I see where you’re coming from.’

The train had arrived in Bournemouth and I got off, thanking them on my way for sharing their stories. They stayed in their seats, continuing on their own journeys.

* * *

Many of us these days are feeling concern, fear and frustration witnessing the effects of human behaviour on the rest of the natural world. What can we do? How can we develop a truly sustainable culture? I love Gary Snyder’s reminder that ‘The term *culture*

... is never far from a biological root meaning as in “yogurt culture” – a nourishing habitat.’³ To be sure, our current culture is nourishing or else it wouldn’t exist. As much as it pained me to listen, I don’t think these young men were fools to be in the military. Obviously, it offered them some nourishment – perhaps a sense of identity in a culture that values masculinity, a sense of security and of contributing to the security of others. And, of course, the military creates a long of jobs for a lot of

³ Snyder, Gary (1990). *The Practice of the Wild*. San Fransisco: North Point Press p15; Online at www.scribd.com

people. It's one way to get money, which in turn is one way to get food, to get nourishment.⁴

At the same time, armies and wars harm lives, cultures and ecosystems. First, there is the violence, the violation, of training young women and men to disconnect from their own compassionate nature, to follow orders, to kill. 'Discipline is necessary to make people obey unreasonable, inhumane, and dangerous orders that benefit someone else. The irony in our modern, free nations is that soldiers are ordered to fight for democracy while being denied any experience of the concept'.⁵ Second, there is the violent impact of guns and bombs on body and soil. And third, the military serves a global economic system whose bottom line is always profit over all else. The needs of rivers and forests, plants and animals, communities and individuals, are made subservient to the need for economic growth.⁶

I acknowledge that our current official political/economic system of government, military and corporations does work in a way, does keep some of us fed, clothed, housed and protected. I would certainly not wish it to all disappear at once because my life, too, is dependent at the moment on oil and supermarkets and transportation systems and a system of order. And what I said earlier that I don't know what the future holds, I do know that life will not carry on exactly as it is now. To live is to change. Besides, how can an economy grow forever in a world that is only so big?⁷

⁴ Lakey, George (1987). *Powerful Peacemaking: A Strategy for Living Revolution*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

⁵ Leier, Mark (2006). *Bakunin: The Creative Passion*. New York: St Martin's Press. p38

⁶ See, e.g., Sanders, Barry. 2009. *The Green Zone: The Environmental Costs of Militarism*. Oakland, CA/Edinburgh: AK Press.

⁷ McBurney, Stuart 1990. *Ecology into Economics Won't Go: Or Life Is Not a Concept*. Foxhole, Green Books.

a relationship between human beings, a way by which people relate to one another; and one destroys it by entering into other relationships, by behaving differently to one another.¹⁸.

Nurturing autonomy, then, is about our relationships. How can we create nurturing relationships with ourselves, each other and the natural world all around us? For me, this means learning to listen less to the stories of what I *should* be doing, what I *should* want, and more to what I need to be well in body and spirit. It means practising the crafts of writing, of growing and gathering foods and medicines, of continually learning to care for myself and others. It means listening to those stories that help me imagine my own life. It means seeking out others who share my concerns and to practice together ways of living with the challenges we face. And it means learning to get along with those I don't seek out, those who already live around me. What amazing relationships might I come to have with my neighbours that I can't yet imagine?

What might nurturing autonomy in Dorset, in your own life, mean for you?

¹⁸ Landauer, G. (1910/2005). 'Weak Statesmen, Weaker People,' *Der Sozialist*. Excerpted in *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas – Volume One: From Anarchy to Anarchism (300CE-1939)*, ed. Robert Graham. Montreal: Black Rose Books.

Did you know that one of the first people to famously question the official system of State and capitalism is buried in the heart of Bournemouth? William Godwin, companion to the revolutionary feminist Mary Wollstonecraft and father to the imaginative storyteller Mary Shelley, has been called the first exponent of anarchism. Godwin, like a long line of anarchists to follow, argued that the State, far from producing a society of equality and freedom, exists to promote the interests of the wealthy. He wrote, in his most famous work *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*: 'The rich are in all such countries directly or indirectly the legislators of the State; and of consequence are perpetually reducing oppression into a system, and depriving the poor of that little commonage of nature which might otherwise still have remained to them.'⁸

An evolving tradition, anarchism offers inspiration for – and practical methods of – radically egalitarian and co-operative alternatives to armies, corporations and States⁹. Instead of a small group of people claiming the authority to make decisions for others, anarchism involves nurturing autonomy. This means direct democracy in communities, workplaces, schools and homes. It means creating cultures which are deeply nurturing, deeply nourishing, honouring the needs (food, shelter, community, intimacy) of all¹⁰. It means supporting each other to develop our capacities to listen, to cooperate, to connect, to share, to imagine. Nurturing autonomy, then, is empowerment – the realisation that power isn't something that other people *have*, it's something we do

⁸ Marshall, Peter, ed. 1986. *The Anarchist Writings of William Godwin*. London: Freedom Press, pp89-90.

⁹ See, e.g., Notes from Nowhere. 2003. *We Are Everywhere: the irresistible rise of global anticapitalism*. London, Verso. Trapeze Collective, ed. 2007. *Do It Yourself: a Handbook for Changing Our World*. London/Ann Arbor: Pluto Press. Ward, Colin. 2004. *Anarchism: a very short introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. *An Anarchist FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions)* online at www.infoshop.org

¹⁰ On needs, I'm inspired by cnvc.org

together. In the military or other situations of domination, power means obediently working together according to some claim of authority. In autonomy, power means working together by listening to each other, caring for each other¹¹.

People sometimes say autonomy can't work, that it goes against human nature. I wonder, how do we know what we are capable of? How can we know when we confuse our potential, our possibilities with the stories we tell ourselves, with the images of ourselves in our minds?¹²

Practice. Autonomy is not something that is achieved, it's not simply replacing one system with another. It is a process of growing, of changing, of empowerment. It is how we realise that we are not who we think we are. It is how we come to imagine our own lives.

I'm also in agreement with those who argue that cooperation, mutual care, autonomy is more fundamental to nature, to human nature, than hierarchy, competition and greed. Ecosystems develop in ways that make conditions suitable for more and more forms of life. Leave a patch of ground alone for long enough and it will evolve into a more complex system; in Britain, ultimately a forest. It does this without any authority. The jungle needs no king. Instead, pioneer species, like dandelion, alders and sycamore contributes to the soil, changing the conditions and preparing the way for other species like oak and hazel¹³. Similarly, humans are relatively vulnerable on our own — we need each other to thrive. We would not have survived as a species without cooperation¹⁴.

¹¹ Begg, Alex (2000) *Empowering the Earth: Strategies for Social Change*. Foxhole, Green Books.

¹² One book that has helped me see this more clearly is Chödrön, Pema 2002. *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.

¹³ See e.g., www.pfaf.org for more details

¹⁴ See e.g., Graeber, David. 2004. *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press; also online at www.prickly-

We can find this, too, in the history of Dorset. I offer here only two of many examples: one from Godwin's time and one from the very recent past. In the transition from feudalism to capitalism, much commonland in Dorset and elsewhere in Britain was privatised, enclosed, depriving common folk of their means of livelihood. This is a process that continues, both here and around the world. As Mike Hannis writes, 'Development has always involved separating people from land.'¹⁵ This so-called progress led to starvation in Dorset as it does today in much of the world. 'The effects of the enclosures were felt hard in the corn-growing chalk lands of North Dorset. Food was scarce and prices were high. In 1795 there was a "housewives revolt" — a non-violent protest led by women in which expensive food was seized and sold to the poor at prices the mob considered fair. The original owner received the proceeds — often considerably lower than he had expected'¹⁶. More recently, surfers in Dorset have protested military occupation of beaches, challenging military authority and arguing for the importance of pleasure and connection with nature¹⁷. In anarchism, both food and play are deeply important.

If autonomy is more sustainable, and more sustaining, how can it be nurtured when the forces of States and corporations seem so overwhelmingly powerful? The key is, they only *seem* powerful. For States and corporations do not exist — they are imaginary monsters, legal fictions, abstractions. You cannot talk to a State or argue with a corporation. They are not beings in themselves, they are patterns of relationships: 'The state is

paradigm.com. Kropotkin, Petr. 2009. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. London: Freedom Press.

¹⁵ From "Reconnecting Land & People?" *Permaculture Magazine*, Autumn 2009, p 8. See also Farlie, Simon. 2009. "A Short History of Enclosure in Britain" in *The Land*, Issue 7, pp. 16–31.

¹⁶ See www.keepmilitarymuseum.org

¹⁷ See news.bbc.co.uk