**Exhausted: Education and the Response to the Planetary Crisis**

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*ABSTRACT*

*The climate crisis is of a severity that fills many with a sense of hopelessness. The modest steps that ordinary citizens can take to reduce energy consumption and waste seem futile in relation to the massive changes that are needed from governments and industry, and inertia often results. The responses of philosophy and education have been conscientious and constructive in many respects, but again these endeavours are overwhelmed by the intransigence of economic interests. Perhaps because of this, such responses are in danger of becoming self-referential expressions of right-mindedness or nostalgic appeals for a simpler, more natural world. The discourse betrays signs of exhaustion—an exhaustion that seems to match the exhausted condition of the planet. The present discussion offers no easy solutions but asks what might be the best way to live in relation to such circumstances and how education might contribute to this.*

**SIXTEEN METRIC TONS OF CARBON**

In a thought-provoking article in *The Atlantic* in January this year, Jedediah Britton-Purdy begins with the following words:

Our first child was born at the end of August. I am not a young parent; I was born in 1974, and in the span of this one generation, global carbon levels rose by nearly twice as much as in all of human history before. I teach environmental law, so naturally people get around to asking whether my wife and I struggled with what it means to bring a child onto this troubled planet, and whether it is a good thing to do at all. (Britton-Purdy, 2020)

The article goes on to explain how the arrival of the new-born, James, has added 7 lb, 10 oz to a planet where humans and their domestic animals together outweigh the other land-based vertebrates by 24 to 1. Being American he will emit sixteen metric tons of carbon a year, compared with five for a French new-born and about two for a baby in India or Indonesia—mostly dictated by the roads, engines, and sources of energy that will keep him cool or warm, feed him, or move him around. ‘He can’t opt out of these systems’, Britton-Purdy writes, ‘without opting out of human life as we live it now.’ Given the dire threats to the environment, this is enough, you might think, and this is a thought the article invites us to consider, to stop anyone having children. Yet the assumption amongst perhaps most parents in the wealthier countries, Britton-Purdy points out, has for some time been that a child comes into the world enveloped in a blanket of safety and security. For most people throughout history this has not been the case. The new normal may be without that blanket.

But while the blanket suggests warmth and comfort and that without it you are going to feel the cold, what we are talking about here is more than this. We are talking about the prospect of extinction. How can you bring children into a world like this? ‘I have never been tempted to think’, Britton-Purdy responds, ‘we should all stop having children and disappear. Part of the reason climate change is so terrible is the threat it poses to human life and culture, and I want to help them go on.’ In the earlier years of his son’s life, there will be little point in telling him about the threats that are faced. But when the thought of climate doom does begin to make sense, ‘I hope it will arrive in a mind already prepared by curiosity and pleasure to know why this world is worth fighting to preserve.’

‘How can you bring children into a world like this?’ is a question that might trouble parents at any time, and it may well have been one that troubled the parents of Britton-Purdy (b. 1974) himself. Such thoughts amongst that generation, however, would more likely have been aroused by a different threat: that of nuclear war and potential annihilation. Since that time, the shadow of the Bomb[[1]](#endnote-1) has lengthened rather than disappeared, but one certainly hears less about it now. Since that time, Britton-Purdy has grown up, and not only did the Cold War mostly end (whatever new chills there is reason to feel), but he is a successful law professor at Columbia University, specialising in environment and energy. He is doing his bit to help human life and culture to go on: he has acquired the wisdom to enable him to write that ‘A love for imperfect and impermanent things isn’t a bad starting point for passionate democratic politics.’ This allows some hope to for a Green New Deal and encourages realism about the fact that, ‘as the poet Wallace Stevens wrote in a 1942 poem eerily titled “The Poems of Our Climate,” the imperfect is our paradise. This ever more broken world is the only route to a better one.’

Some ten years before Britton-Purdy was born, Stanley Cavell wrote an essay on Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* in which he pondered the scene of the play as one of some post-apocalyptic desolation, some end of time. The essay was written in the summer and autumn of 1964, not long after the Cuban Missile Crisis, sometimes referred to as the ‘October Crisis of 1962’. In the essay he marvelled at the gulf that seemed to yawn between the official political rhetoric (‘Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice’ is the nightmare slogan he imagines) and the sense of unrelieved helplessness:

The official rhetoric is rational but it bears to ordinary consciousness the same relation as advanced theology to the words and the audience of a revivalist. What *does* an ordinary Christian think when he says, or hears, that Christ died to save sinners? What does an ordinary citizen think when he says, or hears, that our defense systems provide such and such a margin of warning, or sees a sign saying ‘Fallout Shelter’? (Cavell, 1969a, p. 135).

Cavell finds himself thinking not just about the dark humour in Beckett’s play but about the Peter Sellers film *Dr Strangelove* (1964). The latter provokes a mood of hilarity but of a kind that does not produce laughter. *Endgame* produces some laughter, but it addresses more fully the (still) human tendency to think it right that the world end—‘Not perhaps morally right,’ Cavell adds, ‘but inevitable: tragically right’ (ibid.).

Some twenty years later, in ‘Hope against Hope’, Cavell raises a topic that, he says, matters to him as a teacher, a writer, and a citizen, a concern that he has in common with every thinking person on earth: ‘the imagination, or the refusal of imagination, of nuclear war, the most famous issue now before the world’ (Cavell, 2003, p. 171).[[2]](#endnote-2) The discussion of these matters is pointedly set alongside an examination of ‘one of the most obscure issues of the world’, which he shares in common with ‘a few other obscure persons’: the inability of American culture to listen to the words of one of the founding thinkers of American culture, those of Ralph Waldo Emerson. This inability seems to him to be a ‘refusal to listen to ourselves, to our own best thoughts’ (ibid.). I shall not say more about Emerson here, though this apparently improbable connection in our topics will come back at a later stage.

More pertinent at the moment are some thoughts that Cavell draws from material sent to him by an unnamed friend and student of religious education, also evidently of ‘nuclear education’. The material that was sent concerned ‘a form of Christian fundamentalism that believes nuclear war will be the fulfilment of the Biblical image of Armageddon as given in the book of Revelation, that accordingly a final war is scheduled between us and our enemies in which the stakes are the victory of cosmic good over cosmic evil’ (pp. 171-172).[[3]](#endnote-3)

What *Endgame* seems to dissect is a human psychology of disappointment with existence, despair of happiness, dreams of vengeance, and getting even with life—a vengefulness of which the Bomb is, to put it mildly, a fitting symbol. The problem, however, is not just the substance of such thinking, Cavell appears to say, as if that were not bad enough, but the nature of the means of communication, including, that is, the changing forms in which politics is constructed and news reported. At that time, news of the installation of missile launchers for Armageddon appeared alongside gossip stories and sports reports on the front page or on the nine o’clock news; now the crashing of the iceberg, destruction by bushfire, rising sea-levels, flooding, and extinction of species come to us in the selective muddle of proliferating newsfeeds. You might think that we are, therefore, well-informed and so have no excuse, but in fact, as Cavell remarks with some prescience in a further essay from the 1960s, the ‘organs of news, in the very totality and talent of their courage, become distractions from what is happening, presenting everything happening as overwhelmingly present, like events in old theater. . .’ (Cavell, 1969b, p. 347). The new clickability of this overwhelming presence does little to alleviate the desensitising effects already produced by those earlier surreal juxtapositions. Everything is present and nothing is. Contrary appeals, protests and demonstrations, accusations and denunciations press upon us, each demanding the right to speak for us; and the more total our access to information, the more ignorant we become of why it is given to us and whom to believe. We *have* a voice, of a kind, but it has already been scripted in opinion polls, focus groups, and consultation documents, and overwhelmed by the tides of big data.

‘Since’, to step back through those decades again and pick up the story in ‘Hope against Hope’,

President Reagan is reported on a number of occasions to have endorsed this fundamentalist view—sometimes called ‘end-time theology’, the view that in our time we will see the end of time—it is understandably a question for many of us whether his administration has the will and the taste to muster and be constant to whatever practical wisdom is within human command on the subject of nuclear war. (p. 172)

Cavell intimates that he shares with his friends in religious education the following thought: that the very idea, the appalling idea, that a final nuclear war might be God’s own instrument is an expression of despair, that such a view foments a climate of despair, and that despair might make more likely the fulfilment of our worst fears—a mortal temptation become a mortal danger.

How does this doomsday scenario compare with the one that more obviously confronts us today? What kind of religious response does the prospect of climate disaster elicit? The global nature of the threat, coinciding now with a plague of Biblical proportions, evinces a foreboding of cosmic change. Some, amongst the evangelicals, have seen environmental collapse as the fulfilment of the end of the world, even as predicted by the Bible. Others have seen it as a call for ‘planet-care’, the stewardship of the earth originally entrusted to human beings. Whereas the Cold War could be seen as a cosmic struggle between good and evil that mapped conveniently onto the political constructions of the time, aligning a religious right and a political right, today’s doomsday has aroused divergent views amongst believers: for congregations in Bible Belt America evidently, climate change is a topic more sensitive than race or sex (see Bergman, 2018; Wilkinson, 2012, Veldman, 2019; Gander, 2019).

Even if the Cold War zealots had God on their side and knew at least what to say they would do, they were less bold, thank God, when the consequences were weighed. Meanwhile, the large number of the best-that-lacked-all-conviction were stymied by a sense of powerlessness, and it seemed that the only security blanket people had in the face of the threat was indeed MAD (that is, the deterrent of Mutually Assured Destruction). What *could* be done? It was enough to untether reason.[[4]](#endnote-4) And this is perhaps closer to what is so widely felt today, when the imagination falters or is refused at the thought of climate catastrophe, the most famous issue now before the world. It is not that nothing can be done. We can reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and eat less meat. We can protect the tigers and the trees and the bees. We can do a host of things. But there is a weakness of will, a dispiriting sense that whatever efforts we do make will at best slow down the problem, not eradicate it. Whatever we do is as nothing if governments and big industry do not act. And, besides, we shall probably be dead by then. Most of us, that is. The inertia back then had a visceral feel. Inertia today is more like a spent force, an exhaustion we seem to see mirrored in the depredation and depletion of the planet itself. And so, we acquiesce in the fact that we each emit our (nationally determined) quota of metric tons of carbon a year, whatever is necessary for life to go on, and in despair at political leadership—at Trump’s vulgar denials of climate change, at China’s indifference to the pollution its growth inflicts on its neighbours, and at politicians from Boris Johnson to Jair Bolsonaro who fiddle while sea-levels rise and forests burn. The ease of cynicism exacerbates inertia amongst older generations. There is reason to be struck by walk-outs from school and shamed by the words and actions of Greta Thunberg. But these come as items on the news, before we revert to business-as-usual.[[5]](#endnote-5)

And so, let me come to the proposition at the heart of my concerns. This is that, *when it comes to the question of how to respond to the threat of climate catastrophe, philosophy and education are themselves exhausted*. This is a claim that much in this special issue imagines it can refute.[[6]](#endnote-6) I really hope it can. All those who have contributed would probably agree, however, that educational initiatives can only go so far. They depend upon governments’ having a will and a mandate to bring about major changes in order to prevent the exhaustion of natural resources and irreversible unbalancing of the planet’s ecology. How is *that* going to happen?

James is just a toddler now. but what in the years to come will shape his thoughts about these things? Some of it will come from school, some from his upbringing, from sources of formal and informal education, messages of explicit and implicit kinds. There will be images of a better life, promoted through channels of various kinds and, for sure, news of ecological disasters too. What is shaping young people’s responses now?

Let us conduct a simple thought experiment and imagine that James is already sixteen. What will have shaped his thinking about the climate crisis? Let us imagine some possibilities, in school and out.

**UNSUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

The school the sixteen-year-old James attends is an enlightened place. It is committed to developing awareness of the need for environmental sustainability and responsible action in accordance with this. The school’s principal has taken a particular lead: she has always seen education for a sustainable environment as a top priority, and about ten years ago she discovered and was inspired by the work of Randall Curren. In his *Education for Sustainable Development* (2011), she found thoughts and recommendations that soon found their way into the school’s statements of commitment. James has been used to seeing these displayed on posters around the school, and they are given prominence in the school’s mission statement and on its website.

Equally memorable, however, and also displayed on the posters, are items from the catalogue of facts with which Curren begins. The facts are chilling. Here is a sample:

* Between 1800 and 1950, the human population doubled, from one to two billion; between 1950 and 2000, two billion became six; and the population is currently increasing by 200,000 per day.
* In the years from 1961 to 2005 there was a tripling of the human ecological ‘footprint’, with an accumulation of waste in the air, land, and water.
* Since 1950 some 300,000 species have become extinct, and—this startled me most—the majority of the 10 million or so remaining will be destroyed in our life-times.

Curren is writing over a decade ago, and the school periodically scales these figures up, drawing attention in the process to the escalating crisis. What’s more, the school raises students’ awareness of their carbon footprint, and it does not shy away from such ‘inconvenient truths’ as that the daily onslaught of the messages of consumer capitalism can only make matters worse

Faced with this devastatingly bleak picture, what does Curren recommend? He arrives at twelve precepts, each of which is given a careful gloss. Many are, in fact, addressed by the contributors to this special issue.

1. Respect children’s right to know, at the same time providing teachers with the opportunity to find out what they need to know.
2. Teach environmental studies more systematically.
3. Integrate this with honest history and prehistory.
4. Integrate economics with environmental studies.
5. Encourage resourcefulness, inventiveness, and adaptability.
6. Encourage the enjoyment of environmentally friendly activities as a basis for flourishing lives.
7. De-commercialise schools.
8. Teach critical thinking and enable children to distinguish the truth from propaganda.
9. Encourage critical self-reflection and creative living through literature and the arts.
10. Use collaborative, civic, and project-based learning.
11. Prepare children for global cooperation.
12. Prepare everyone for a world with lower fertility rates and the prospect of fewer human beings.

To James’ teachers these seem to be eminently sensible recommendations, and to me they seem so too. But, strangely, it is in this reasonableness that I have come to detect a problem—a problem not just in Curren but in me too, and in all of us who, quite reasonably, nod in assent to what is proposed here. What is the nature of that problem? Well, first, there is a problem of blandness or vagueness: one can easily imagine most of these recommendations being answered to in ways that are little more than tokenistic, where, for example, science textbooks incorporate a few pages on ‘science and the environment’, where sustainable development becomes a topic in geography, where schools dabble in the teaching of critical thinking, etc. What kind of school would claim that it does *not* encourage resourcefulness and adaptability, or *not* teach history honestly? These measures can degenerate into gestures, of little more substance than the environmentally friendly policies of hotels or the green credentials marketed by otherwise toxic companies. In any case, what would show us that we had travelled sufficiently far down the twelve paths that Curren recommends?

Although he was initially impressed, James himself has cottoned on to some of these problems and is becoming cynical. He turned vegetarian two years ago, and has been vegan for the past six months, which has somehow made him feel a bit less bad about things, but really, as he knows, this is not going to make much difference. He is not blind to the material attractions of the American way of life, and he is aware that TV and media images promote this around the world? What if everyone in China and India lived like this? Natural resources could soon be exhausted, the ecological balance tipped, and human beings would join other species on the road to extinction. We need radical change in the ways we live and think. Where is he to turn for this?

**CINEMA AND THE RETURN TO NATURE**

Matt Ross’s *Captain Fantastic* tells the story of a family living in splendid isolation, somewhere in the wilds of the Pacific North-West states. Ben and Leslie are devoting themselves to raising their children in a life of self-sufficiency, to educating them to think critically, to teaching them to be physically healthy and fit. They are training them to live in the wild, without technology, and to experience the beauty of co-existence with the natural world.

James sees that the film was first shown at the Sundance Festival in 2016, and that raises his interest. He wonders if this is an example of the more radical response to environmental crisis he is looking for, and he checks out some of the reviews. *Captain Fantastic*, as Manohla Dargis puts it in the *New York Times*,

centers on a family that has found its bliss in splendid, unplugged isolation. Somewhere in deepest Oregon, amid the tall pines and soaring mountains, young and old hunt and holler . . . on a compound where they have thrived beautifully without electricity, a sewer line or trend alerts about the Kardashians. . .

Ben Cash and his ailing ‘dream of a wife’, Leslie, are raising their six children, who range in age from 7 to 18:

By day, Ben teaches and trains the children, racing them through the woods like Olympians. . . At night, the family plays music together and reads by firelight — leafing through books one page at a time — before bedding down in the communal tepee. . . Ben and Leslie have opted to live in seclusion as a matter of principle, having embraced protest as an ideal. At its loftiest, their profound seclusion suggests that they’re spiritual and philosophical heirs to an isolationist like Henry Thoreau. . . (Dargis, 2016)

As a matter of fact James had already come across some connection with Thoreau, because when he was browsing the pages about the film, he had seen a comment someone had posted headed ‘*Ben and Civil Disobedience*’, which began with the quotation: ‘I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.’ [[7]](#endnote-7) He knows *Walden* is on the bookshelves somewhere in his home, and he has some idea that it is about turning your back on society and going off to live in isolation in the forest. He has been meaning to find out more.

When he takes a look at the film, he is a bit confused. Life in the green forest, surrounded by tall trees, looks good, but then when it comes to the survival skills the children are learning, what they are doing seems almost like Special Forces training. There is the deer-hunt, where you certainly see the blood and the wielding of the knife—a scene that the review says is supposed to connect with *Lord of the Flies* and *Apocalypse Now*. (He remembers his grandparents talking about that other Vietnam film, *The Deer Hunter*, too. Isn’t that the more obvious connection?) Something else he finds odd is the mix of humour and solemn purpose, even if the purposes are not always clear. For sure, these people are ecological dissenters, and there is an upfront political message about consumerism and capitalism. It is kind of crazy—funny but a bit weird—that they celebrate Chomsky’s birthday and treat his books as sacred. But is Chomsky a survivalist, a doomsday prepper? Not only that—this family sometimes makes him think of those people in the North Western Imperative, who want to preserve these states just for white people, America’s last defence against race. Somehow this does not square with all that reading of those famous books, all that education they seem to be getting.[[8]](#endnote-8) Apparently, so the *NY Times* review ends up saying, the director’s ‘insistence on taking your intelligence for granted is itself a great turn on’, and James tries to keep this in mind, wondering if he has missed something in this strange mix of messages.

But then when he goes back to the reviews, he comes across one that tells a different story. *The Guardian’s* film-critic Peter Bradshaw refers bluntly to ‘this fatuous and tiresome movie’, asking whether the father is to be seen as ‘a creepy authoritarian cult leader or quixotic countercultural hero’ and whether perhaps we are supposed to believe that he is a charismatic mix of the two’. Whichever it is, the issue is fudged. In the end this is a story of men’s intellectual development: the family’s eldest son, Bo, is ‘the putative academic star; the sisters aren’t important and, in this film, women are either irrelevant, saintly or dead’ (Bradshaw, 2016). Come to think of it, the sisters don’t really do much in the film, do they? And this makes James wonder again about its macho side.

As it happens, on the same pages, he comes across a film that has come out more recently, and this does not seem macho at all. *Little Women* is advertised with beautiful pictures of the New England countryside. As one reviewer puts it, the director Greta Gerwig ‘draws on the geography of the region: the vividly exuberant New England autumn colour palette flushes through the childhood scenes; the modest gentility of Alcott’s own childhood home is recreated for the March family residence’ (Ide, 2019). Judging from the trailer, it looks like this ‘autumn colour palette’ is there even in the girls’ hair and clothes. It turns out that all this is taking place in and around Concord, Massachusetts, around the time Thoreau was writing his book. In fact, James discovers, Louisa M. Alcott, the author of the novel, was taught for a time by Thoreau, at the experimental school set up by her father, Bronson Alcott. She became very attached to Thoreau, even to the extent of unrequited love, and he is reincarnated in the characters she creates.

All this piques James’ interest further, and, with some trepidation, he takes *Walden* from the bookshelves at home. He looks at the strange chapter headings (‘Economy’, ‘Where I Lived, and What I Lived For’, ‘Reading’, ‘Sounds’, ‘Solitude’, ‘The Beanfield-Field’, ‘Brute Neighbors’), reads the opening words (‘I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up.’), and sets about reading the first pages. But quite quickly he loses it. He leafs through some more to see where this is going. He even finds pages showing what seem to be household bills. Where *is* this going? The book goes back on the shelf—perhaps he will return to it later— but for now perhaps it will be best to see what more he can find out online. The Sparknotes Guide seems to be what he needs. What does it tell him?

*Walden* dwells on the contentment of Thoreau’s solitude, on his ‘finding entertainment in the laugh of the loon and the march of the ants rather than in balls, marketplaces, or salons’; and in view of his doubts about the value of travel, it is ‘far better for him to go vegetate in a little corner of the woods for two years than to commute from place to place unreflectively’.[[9]](#endnote-9) Thoreau, he learns, went to live in the woods just four years after Emerson had published his most widely-known essay, ‘Self-Reliance’, and Thoreau’s experiment in living is an attempt to put Emerson’s ideas into practice. His self-reliance is economic and social: he does not disdain companionship but welcomes it only on his own terms, refusing to ‘need human society’. And he is almost obsessed with showing through his detailed financial accounts that the products of his labour make him not only self-sufficient but able to turn a profit in the ‘economic game of life’. But self-reliance, the Notes remind James, is not just about paying bills: Thoreau follows Emerson in exploring the ‘higher dimensions of individualism’, where ‘the self is the absolute center of reality’. Thoreau is both accountant and poet: ‘the man who is so interested in pinching pennies is the same man who exults lyrically over a partridge or a winter sky’.

But how badly this goes wrong! In the first place, Thoreau is concerned with accounting.[[10]](#endnote-10) As James had earlier noticed, Thoreau does present a page of accounts detailing his expenditure on rice and molasses. But this is juxtaposed, with pointed irony, against a page in which he vituperates against the operations of the big banks. It makes you think about accounting too. To be meaningful and justifiable, accounting must be appropriate to the matter at hand, sometimes involving measurement, sometimes not, and always involving something more than mere counting: some sense of what counts and why. *Walden* as a whole is Thoreau’s attempt to account for himself in this way and thereby to explore what accounting for one’s days and ways might mean. In the second place, Thoreau is influenced by Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance’, but this has little to do with American individualism or the self-centring that the Notes refer to. Thoreau builds his hut about a mile from his neighbours, an easy walk from the centre of Concord. His experiment is offered as a challenge to the townsfolk about the false necessities by which they live: it asks them how they account for themselves. He is looking not only for a different relation to the land but for a different incarnation of work and rest. How do we house ourselves? What do we eat? What of our relation to our neighbours, our connections at home and abroad? What of slavery and the war on Mexico? How do we deal with death and birth, with settlement and departure? The economy of living at issue here is an economy of the words we use and of the thoughts and practices that they enable. Far from any crude individualism and far from isolation, this suggests aspiration towards our own best selves, aspiration to improve the hour, as Emerson has it, or, as Thoreau,

to improve the nick of time, . . . . to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment, to toe that line. You will pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men’s, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all about it, and never paint ‘No Admittance’ at my gate. (Thoreau, 1983/1854, p. 59)

What is aspired to is typically understood in terms of a new reality—the good city, the good society. It involves thinking how our world should be constituted, what words we can find for it, what practices give it substance, what standards sustain it; it involves questioning what America might be and, considering its creation, inauguration, and constitution, how far the idea of America has *not* been realised, how far America has not been discovered. That these questions are never far from the preoccupations of *Walden* is made plain enough by the fact that Thoreau began to build his house on the 4th July.

The book needs to be seen alongside such visionary texts about education and the good society as Plato’s *Republic* and Rousseau’s *Emile*. Thoreau’s *Walden*, about a century after *Emile*, is an experiment in writing and living, in which he ponders the possibility of ‘uncommon schools’, our continuing need for education (see Standish, 2006, 2020).[[11]](#endnote-11) None of this is to deny Thoreau’s knowledge and celebration of the natural world, which is abundantly clear in his writings: ‘in Wildness’, he writes, ‘is the preservation of the World’ (Thoreau, 2019, p. 63), and wildness is something of the human too. But he is advocating neither isolation nor an escape to nature. Thoreau went to the woods because he wanted to confront the facts of life. It would be a poor legacy for his readers if he retired there. But, as he writes in the book’s closing pages, ‘I left the woods for as good a reason as I went there. Perhaps it seemed to me that I had several more lives to live, and could not spare any more time for that one’ (Thoreau, 1983/1854, p. 371). And this suggests that his purpose has more to do with confronting the facts of life through finding new ways to live, with living differently with what we already think we know, rather than escaping to the wilds. The balance of his account shows a return to the town, and this underlines that we too, within our urban, technologically advanced, socially mediated lives, might also be ready to let go and live as experiment. The sixteen metric tons of carbon that, it is anticipated, James will emit each year drops to seven if he moves to Washington DC but rises if he opts for a less populous state.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Both of the films James sees have explicit political concerns—respectively with the rejection of the consumerist values driving capitalism and with the place of women, more specifically with prospects for a woman writer, in 19th century America—and both draw on the beauty of the natural world. But in neither case are these different aspects adequately integrated, the scenes of nature working at best as imagery for the human story that is being played out. The contrast between nature and the human is sustained, a contrast Thoreau writes to weaken and undermine. The scenery becomes picturesque.

Walden Pond *is* a beautiful place to visit, the woods magnificent as they change through the seasons. The place where Thoreau built his hut is duly marked. The railroad is a short distance away, and it is moving to stand on the open track and stare down the lines. The Thoreau Society’s Shop at Walden Pond[[13]](#endnote-13) displays various editions of Thoreau’s texts and a range of books about Thoreau, some lavishly illustrated, as well as t-shirts, mugs, greetings cards, jewellery, a predictable range of souvenirs. That the place is celebrated in this way should surely be no surprise. After all, it was because of the Thoreau connection that I went there, as opposed to the many other beautiful lakes in New England. When I visited, I looked in the Shop but could not find *The Senses of Walden* (Cavell, 1981/1972), Cavell’s commentary on Thoreau’s book, which elaborates extensively on the kinds of criticisms I have raised here. The salesperson was enthusiastic but told me, perhaps with mild embarrassment, that he had not come across it. Thoreau declares his desire to ‘speak without bounds, to men in their waking moments’, but Walden has become theatricalised. His unflagging criticism of the lives of those who ‘are said to live in New England’ (Thoreau, 1983/1854, p. 46), involves the charge that they are living a lie. They are living imitation lives. But here, in celebrating Thoreau’s achievement, experience itself has become artificial, and the fantasy of a return to nature a new kind of security blanket.

**ENDING THE STORY OF THE END**

It is time to end our little thought experiment and to restore James to the condition of infancy, to the way he really is today. What the experiment has shown are the limitations, even the exhaustion, of education’s familiar ways of answering to the climate crisis—of worthy precepts and an idealised return to nature. How, in the years to come, might James’ education serve him better? It is his father’s hope, as we saw, that by the time the problem of climate change becomes apparent to his son, ‘it will arrive in a mind already prepared by curiosity and pleasure to know why this world is worth fighting to preserve.’ Stimulants of curiosity and pleasure will come readily enough, from mass and social media quietly reinforcing the status quo. But this is surely not what his father has in mind. What will it take for James to resist these influences and to overcome the prevailing inertia?

He will need to resist not only the reliance on dogma (end-time theology) but also uncritical appeal to science, whether to phony science or selective reliance on evidence or to the pretensions to pure science in fields where normative considerations are unavoidable (economics). The end-time theology of the 1980s was a perversion of religion, and something like this remains with us now. There-is-no-alternative free-market economics remains with us too, in less brazen but more pervasive ways, riding the recurrent claim that economics is a science and value-free. The climate crisis itself rests on an ambiguous relationship to science, where once again scientific evidence is perverted or invoked selectively in the cause of political concerns. Politicians now facing a pandemic are claiming to be ‘led by the science’, but they do this opportunistically and unreliably. For sure, we need good science, but in the end, science cannot settle questions as to how we should live or about what our societies should be like. What kind of education will James need if he is to recognise the human failings demonstrated here and answer these questions?

James, like all of us, needs the humanities. The objects of study in the humanities are matters of human action. They are approached not through abstraction or generalisation or laws but through attention to the specificity of words and action, in which meaning and value are always intertwined. If an initiation into the humanities is to be truly educational, it will not be governed oriented towards over-specified learning outcomes, nor subordinated to checklists of criteria. It will not be reduced to getting good results. Crucially, it will involve practice in the exercise of judgement where there is no fixed rule, no fixed standard to measure by. This is not judgement where anything goes but where, through having their attention drawn to what is significant and what is not, and to the kinds of reasoning through which such judgements can be defended, students develop greater sensitivity of judgement—refinement in seeing what matters in a particular case. They must not mimic their teachers but must come to see that judgement is up to them: they must find what reasons seem to them to count, and to be ready to say why this is so.

An education in aesthetic appreciation and judgement is peculiarly relevant here, because if in such matters the learner simply adopts the teacher’s point of view or merely copies—in effect, hides behind—what their friends are saying, this makes what they say empty and pointless. Aesthetic judgement fundamentally depends upon felt response, and to be worth anything, this must be genuine. It is not exactly that they are individuated by this, as if a list of their preferences was to be revealed, but rather that they are singularised: they are called upon to respond to the particularity o what confronts them. Through such judgement young people can come to account for themselves. The humanities are means to a better understanding of human nature, to what makes history, and to what constitutes society. They are the best preparation for responsible participation in democracy. Students come to see for themselves the ambition and vanity to which human beings are prone, the rhetorical ploys on which politics relies, and the manipulative tendencies of mass and social media. They know something of what has happened in the past, of the promises that have been made, and the way that things have gone wrong before. The exercise of judgement in expressing their views may have given them the imagination for what is new, but they will have learned not to expect too much. Through this they may then acquire the discernment that would give to responsible policy the mandate it desperately needs; without this they are prey to populism.

If education were primarily about getting the best grades, as the current culture of achievement seems to think, then perhaps James would do very well, achieving straight As and, perhaps, excelling in the debating society as well. But high achievers can turn into ‘excellent sheep’ in William Deresiewicz’s phrase—successful products of the system but hollowed out beings who think only according to the prescribed canons and fashions of thought and who are drawn only by the insignia of success, not human beings who draw on themselves in perception and judgement (Deresiewicz, 2014). Such achievers may oil the wheels of neoliberal societies, but the good society needs more from the education of its people. It is sometimes held that it is wrong to try to change society by changing its schooling, as if this were preserving what is sacrosanct about education. But is there any education that does not in some way affect society, very often by merely bolstering the status quo. Aggressive competition in schools and the inflamed preoccupation with achievement collude with neoliberal values and dull the critical edge democracy: they exhaust the thinking on which it depends. Such values may extend the blanket of security, but the blanket is wearing thin.

Thoreau ends *Walden* with the lines: ‘The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. The sun is but a morning star’ (Thoreau, 1983/1954, p. 382). But he begins the book, as we saw, by declaring that he is not proposing to write an ode to dejection. Coleridge had already done that. At a stroke, Thoreau places himself in relation to, and at a distance from, Romanticism, and indicates something about the mood the book tries to realise. ‘That Thoreau’s morning means simultaneously dawning and grieving,’ Cavell writes,

means that what he calls anticipating the dawning of a new day, a new time, an always earlier or original time, is at the same time his undergoing what Freud calls the work of mourning, letting the past go, giving it up, giving it over, dispensing the Walden it was time for him to leave, without nostalgia, without a disabling elegiacism. Nostalgia is an inability to open the past to the future, as if the strangers who will replace you will never find what you have found (Cavell, 2005, pp. 217-218).

This dawning of grieving is the only alternative Thoreau gives to ‘our present constitution’, which he says must end; and with this expression he has in mind our political constitution with its slaves, and whatever it is that ‘permits this constitution of our souls’ (Cavell, 1984, p. 54). *Walden* is a book about ‘crisis and transformation’, and its imperative is that we turn mourning into morning, that we depart from the ways we are constituted (Cavell, 2005, p. 216; Cavell and Standish, 2012, p. 171).

So, we are to live affirmatively, welcoming the day. But how can this speak to the threat of annihilation that *Endgame* considers? I am not exactly suggesting it does. But there is a darker note to Thoreau’s image too. The sun is but a *mourning* star, that is, a star in decline, a star that will one day be burnt out—and then there will be no more days.

*Endgame* seems to lead to the view that we must live somewhere between despair and hope, and that an enemy to our living well in this way is the hope for salvation—the hope or belief that one day things will be brought to a final account, one day the story of our lives will make sense, all will be given final definition. ‘The greatest endgame is Eschatology,’ Cavell writes,

the idea that the last things of earth will have an order and a justification, a sense. That is what we hoped for, against hope, that was what salvation would look like. Now we are to know that salvation lies in reversing the story, in ending the story of the end, dismantling Eschatology, ending the world of order in order to reverse the course of the world laid on it in its Judeo-Christian end. (Cavell, 2002a/1969a, p.149)

The biggest fiction is ‘that one’s days form a story, that you can capture them by telling them’ (p. 152). It is not that the world lacks meaning but rather that things mean too much: everything crowds in with a meaning. Education’s pathological subservience to accountability and performativity manifests this with a vengeance, in its ubiquitous spreadsheets and checklists, in its exhaustive gathering of data, and in a busyness and innovation that, in reality, is a veneer over nihilistic inertia. Instruments of assessment and monitoring cast their influence over education as a whole, constricting the very idea of what education is and denying the space for judgement where most it is needed.

Release from exhaustion and the possibilities of a better education will not come from securing meaning, nor from algorithms, risk management, or insurance policies that attempt to anticipate and master the way things become: such measures trade in the promise of assurance that might hasten conviction in a final solution. It will depend instead on a kind of restraint and reluctance, on little stories (*petits récits*), on fine-grained pervasive exercises of judgement and imagination, and on knowledge with a lighter touch. Excessive faith in science might support the former. The turn to the humanities would reflect a greater humility. And this would involve coming to understand one’s singularity, where finding words for oneself is a never-ending task.

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1. Referring to the symbolic ‘Doomsday Clock’. former President of Ireland Mary Robinson, makes the plea: ‘**We ask world leaders to join us in 2020 as we work to pull humanity back from the brink. The Doomsday Clock now stands at 100 seconds to midnight, the most dangerous situation that humanity has ever faced. Now is the time to come together—to unite and to act.**’ The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists explains: ‘Humanity continues to face two simultaneous existential dangers—nuclear war and climate change—that are compounded by a threat multiplier, cyber-enabled information warfare, that undercuts society’s ability to respond. The international security situation is dire, not just because these threats exist, but because world leaders have allowed the international political infrastructure for managing them to erode.’ Former California Governor Jerry Brown, executive chair, Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, warns: ‘**Dangerous rivalry and hostility among the superpowers increases the likelihood of nuclear blunder. Climate change just compounds the crisis. If there’s ever a time to wake up, it’s now.**’

   Online at: <https://thebulletin.org/doomsday-clock/>. Accessed 20 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. ‘Hope against Hope’ was originally an address given at an honours convocation at Iona College in October 1985. It was first published in *The American Poetry Review* in the January/February issue of 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In response to the question ‘Are doomsday prophesies influencing decisions in the Trump administration — or at least how they get explained?’, Audrey Farley writes: ‘The answer seems to be a clear yes. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a longtime evangelical, drew upon the Book of Revelations to defend the Trump administration’s drone-strike assassination of Iranian Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, and he has regularly [referenced](https://twitter.com/tommyxtopher/status/1078298857434501120?s=20) the “rapture” to defend American support of Israel, among other positions. He is just one of the top White House officials, along with Vice President Pence, to [attend](https://qz.com/1270516/jerusalem-embassy-trumps-foreign-policy-looks-like-rapture-christians-plan-to-trigger-apocalypse/) an End Times Bible study group, which informs the domestic and foreign policy thinking of attendees.’ Online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/01/28/apocalyptic-ideas-influencing-pence-pompeo-could-also-power-left/>. Accessed 20 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. It still is. World spending on nuclear weapons rose in 2019 to $73 billion. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See especially Anna Kouppanou’s ‘Environmental Education and Children’s Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene’ (Kouppanou, 2020) and

   Adrian Skilbeck’s ‘“A thin net over an abyss”—Greta Thunberg and the Importance of Words in Addressing the Climate Crisis’ (Skilbeck, 2020) in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jeff Stickney has argued that place and arts-based learning is to be recommended as part of an education toward self-fulfilment, and whether at the twilight of an individual’s life or that of our global civilization. This opens to the thought, he has suggested, that educational endeavour in these respects has the form of palliative care. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Online at: [https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3520840/?ref\_=ur\_urv](about:blank). Accessed 16 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Simon Heath, co-author of ‘“Mother-trees” and Teachers: Connecting My Daughter’s Environmental Education with Diana Beresford-Kroeger’s Enduring Wisdom’, has written a trilogy of novels on back to the land migration. See <https://wheneverythingfallsapart.ca/the-trilogy/>. Accessed 20 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The paragraph paraphrases the guide and quotes from it liberally. Online at: [https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/walden/themes/](about:blank). Accessed 16 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. ‘Economy’ is the opening and by far the longest of the seventeen chapters of the book, comprising about a quarter of its total length. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In 2017, Washington DC recorded 6.9 and Wyoming 127.1 metric tons of carbon-related energy emissions per person. There are features of the Wyoming economy that help to explain this extreme difference, but the general point still holds. Online at: <https://www.eia.gov/environment/emissions/state/>. Accessed 20 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See [https://www.shopatwaldenpond.org/](about:blank). Accessed 20 July 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)