

Love in a Time of Chaos

A Philosophy of Human Relations

WARNING¹

At an insane time and with limited space, we write this as an academic poem and philosophical story, a message in a bottle, a relational, “dialectician’s hymn,”² and an ode to all that is interconnected, holy, and whole in communication and communion with each other.

RECORD OF THE RUNDOWN DUPLEX

He grew up in Southern California, and, in response to childhood trauma, began studying Buddhism in college. He read Kamo no Chōmei’s *Hōjōki*.³ Chōmei’s classic account of losing his father, being turned over for promotion, and becoming a hermit—in an era of political and environmental chaos—resonated. Even before 9/11, he sensed he was growing up in a world that was breaking bad, becoming a socially mediated post-postmodern farce, in a very dangerous William Gibson way. Both he and Chōmei “lived in a time of political and social upheaval, when two great warrior clans . . . were contending for dominance of the court and the nation.”⁴ The wounded Californian ran off to the mountains of Southern Appalachia, like the monk, in self-exile. So many in his place and time felt without a country,⁵ decades before the 2016 election and COVID-19 pandemic put the insanity and toxicity of contemporary culture on display for all to see.

High above the rundown duplex, atop the ridge, tower the cliffs of Diamond Rocks. There they have existed for more than 750 million years.⁶ The raw and wild beauty of this place called to him and more than made up for apartment’s deteriorating state of disrepair. Besides, on an overheating and violent planet, it made sense to get away into nature and where it’s cold, even though winters felt like living in the hotel in *The Shining*.⁷ These ancient mountains have a dark spiritual energy capable of catalyzing a life. The previous tenant of this particular apartment, also named Chris, died suddenly

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one night, creating for him the opportunity to live there. For years, he lived and drifted further away into a combination of meditation and medication.

RECONSTRUCTING CHAOS

She grew up in the fields of the Mississippi Delta, where the social oppression made the oppressive humidity seem mild. She left for college, but family brought her back home, to the place where generations of her ancestors had lived from the time of cotton plantations and reconstruction, through Jim Crow, desegregation, and into the *modern* South, where a tenuous and confusing blend of post-racial idealization exists alongside systemic racism and intergenerational trauma. When she was fifteen, one of her classmates, a friend who had given her rides to high school football games, was charged with the murder of a rival gang member. In spite of being neighbors, they occupied two very different worlds, and neither of them had done anything to deserve the lot they'd drawn.

At sixteen, she watched the Columbine massacre on her parents' television. Her sophomore year of college the Twin Towers fell, and her instinct was to get gas, having grown up during the Persian Gulf War. Endless acts of racism, injustice, violence, and war punctuated her young adulthood. She married young and built a traditional life in troubled times.

When she could no longer maintain the façade, she filed for divorce with no plan other than survival. Careening into life as a professional woman and single mother, she ensured her children and career thrived, even as the chaos she'd fought so hard to control began to take over. She came to embody a sinewy strength, mastering the art of smiling through pain and carrying on. Surviving life-threatening bouts of depression, she learned to better appreciate all that she had and felt unconscionably privileged. Being aggressively pursued by men, an all-too-common occurrence for women, disgusted her. She came to welcome the fact that men were flawed, as it gave her a safe out.

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE

In 2017, their friend and colleague Andrew Herrmann introduced them at a hotel bar in Nashville at a regional conference.⁸ As professors of the same subject, they benefited from similar occupational psychoses of the tenure track.⁹ Their careers afforded them both productive escapes from the suffering of their lives. He recognized a longing in her eyes, as they talked about Kenneth Burke and significant others. Although she knew nothing of him, she felt a familiar sadness and was drawn to his gentle authenticity, traits often characteristic of people who have known grief. She welcomed the surprise of not feeling preyed upon. They became friends.

The next time they saw each other, at a conference¹⁰ a year later, it was two months after he left the hospital following a brush with insanity, brought on by the (mostly internal) stress of earning tenure. While he had dodged the bullet of social/professional failure that struck Chōmei, his shining life on the ridge became too real. At his lowest, she handled him with great care and a lack of judgment. For two years since, they supported

each other through life. Grateful and feeling the utmost privilege, with the encouragement of their friends, families, her three children, and colleagues, they fell in love and formed a family. Under the cover of quarantine, they nested. He moved away from the wreck on the ridge and bought a house¹¹ overlooking Grandfather Mountain State Park. He asked her to marry him, and, suddenly, they embodied the ideal of the American Dream at the end of an empire.

QUE THE PANDEMIC: EVER IN NEED OF COLLECTIVE REVELATION

What do we make of the paradox of being personally and relationally happier than we've ever been in a world and public that are changing radically, waking up screaming, overheating, and tearing ourselves apart?

In addressing this paradox, we aim to listen to personal, relational, and collective calls for human consciousness raising from across space, time, culture, and orientation. This collective project, what Gayatri Spivak once called *the slow cooking of the human soul*,¹² is found in feminist, scientist, Buddhist, contemplative, native, and Western enlightenment traditions, to name only an important few. Now, today, this paradox involves listening compassionately to each other in a socially mediated, propagandistic cesspool of discursive pollution and violence. The “‘collective revelation’ of long standing”¹³ we speak of is one of axiological (ethical) *action*: it uses “such key terms as *tao*, *karma*, *dike*, *energeia*, *hodos*, *actus*—all of them words for *action*.” Robert Bringham¹⁴ calls such attempts at enlightening and enlightened symbolic action *humanism* in the broad sense, our native tongue and deepest vocation of making meaning, a form of *linguistic ecology*. Bringham, a poet and typographer, listens to and translates dying, native languages—in order to learn from and possibly save such precious knowledges and means for acting more sustainably and harmoniously. Such humanist knowledge (native and/or colonized alike) all point out the interdependent, ecologically networked and interconnected nature of human life and meaning, as not separate from the cosmos and environment and nature and reality of which we are a part. Yet currently and throughout history, humans have not been good at practicing what we preach or listening to our elders (beyond our own stereotypes and prejudices).¹⁵ As a species, we've been better at righteous murder, racist murder, state murder, murder in the name of all that is holy, most centrally murder in the name of *capital*. The historical definition of civilization can justifiably be termed: the point at which the few began to dominate the many.¹⁶

THE PHYSICS AND POETICS OF COMPASSION

Progressive capitalism led to the current trained incapacities¹⁷ of productivity, irrational individualism, a foreclosure of the aesthetic imagination,¹⁸ and an unsustainable pursuit of more at all costs.¹⁹ Perhaps such clear incongruence—between the “suicidal dream”²⁰ of capitalism (perpetual growth—economic cancer) and an overexploited, abused, and finite ecosystem now coughing up pandemics—may provide an opportunity for change, what Burke refers to (also at a time of great social, political, and economic upheaval)²¹ as

“transitional clashing.” Perhaps it is in this moment we can reclaim the creative power of “poetic perspective[s],”²² to create better equipment for interfacing with each other and the environment.

As Richard Rorty wrote, “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.”²³ But why do human symbols matter in physical reality? Burke responds: “I should make it clear: I am not pronouncing on the metaphysics of this controversy. Maybe we are but things in motion. I don’t have to haggle about that possibility. I need but point out that, whether or not we are just things in motion, we think of one another (and especially of those with whom we are intimate) as *persons*.”²⁴ We would add to Burke that we can think of the environment, too, as something with which we can identify-beyond-identity.²⁵ When we humanize, even the environment (seeing how humans fit within, as a part), we can cultivate the hopeful side of our capacity for change. Human cultural evolution radically outpaces biological evolution. And while this thought might give us hope, it also means the road to genocide is always near and paved with terminologies of dehumanization and demeaning.

Burke warns: “If *action* is to be our key term, then *drama*; for drama is the culminative form of action. . . . if *drama*, then *conflict*. And if *conflict*, then *victimage*. Dramatism is always on the edge of this vexing problem, that comes to a culmination in tragedy, the song of the scapegoat.”²⁶ We see this happening in the neo-hyper-propaganda of the day, amplifiers of and for scapegoating, righteous scapegoating fueled by digital addictions, echo chambers, and a few billionaires who are richer and more powerful today than any king throughout history.²⁷

THE ART OF LIVING PARADOX

Burke’s “philosophy for human relations” puts humans on the edge of the paradox of compassion and violence. To dance on this razor’s edge, we must learn to hold contradiction and paradox as an ethical way of being, an interdependent balancing act. We must choose the middle ground²⁸ and refuse the tools of annihilation on all sides. “We must make room for marital hate.”²⁹ We must read and listen deeply and dialectically to “both the Union and the Diversity. Whereat we, listening, can remake our habits.”³⁰ Our terminologies ought to be fluid, evolving, pliable, adaptable, able to cope with contradiction without obliteration. Such symbolic actions are rooted in our evolving capacity to hold thought in awareness, an awareness that is greater than our symbolic capacity, from which our symbols emerge and toward which they point. Burke³¹ proposes we “deliberately cultivate the use of contradictory concepts” to most nearly approach reality. Zen agrees.

This all sounds so out there, but it happens between us daily—most every time we come into conflict.³² Like the time we were writing an article together and both got defensive, then both got reflexive, and then became responsive, and then both learned a new way to collaborate more gently together moving forward. These moments of conflict are the magic moments³³ in relationships, and we know that mathematically at this point.³⁴ But to communicate in such a way is an art, one of continually, mindfully down-regulating one’s own reactivity. We are speaking of the art of living: “the corrective

of the scientific rationalization would seem necessarily to be a *rationale of art*—not however, a performer’s art, not a specialist’s art for some to produce and many to observe, but an art in its widest aspect, an *art of living*.³⁵ Living with paradox is a lifelong practice and easier said than done.

EVERYDAY LIVES AND RELATIONSHIPS

From the beginning, our communication matched what we had learned in studying relational communication for more than two decades. Our relationship was nothing special, in the sense that most humans are capable of having such a communicative dynamic. That such a dynamic is common is precisely what makes it powerful. Like awakening the Buddha within, compassionate relationships and communication are closer than we think and part of our normal, everyday life and interactions. Compassionate communication is a daily practice of gentle, honest awareness of and with one another.

It is seeing the other deeply, whether that other be a human or animal in front of you, a salamander along the river, or fungi on the rotting wood. It means validating perspectives and experiences that you don’t share. It’s recognizing why in American culture it is necessary to specify that Black Lives Matter. It is less defending and more present listening. It is the ability to *just be* in one another’s presence, without distraction or destruction. It means letting go of absolutisms and seeking transformation. The aim is coexistence with one another and the planet.

Compassionate interaction is the path of slowing down, coming to our senses over and over again, and coming to terms with the trauma of experience³⁶ over and over again with each other, doing our best to see with our own eyes and name with our own minds, the unknowability of the persons, beings, and worlds in front of us. This is what we’ve done, from the beginning. We’ve made meaning together, in a demeaning age. We’ve created a family while the world and our culture are falling to pieces and are ripe for radical change, just like our ancestors have done through all time. Putting things in perspective brings relief.

OUT OF EXILE:³⁷ ACTING TOGETHER IN THE END³⁸

He’s glad she pulled him back from making the same mistake as the monk. She’s thankful he saved her from self-destruction. We all need each other and are all fragile beings. How many of our most sensitive have chosen self-immolation of one kind or another? Now is not a time for total retreat, nor a time for (self- or other) annihilation. Now is a time for seeking balance within ourselves, our relationships, and our communities. Now is where we can reckon with our pasts and the ghosts that haunt our individual and national consciousnesses and identities—our histories of genocide, slavery, and violence. But we cannot get there by blowing it all away or living in the future or past. We can only get there by talking with those who are different from us and listening to those who have yet to speak and may not be able to speak today. It is far too late to make amends for past sins. So much of the world is already blown away in the wake of, and waking up from, capitalism. Billions are still in poverty, intergenerational economic disparities widen, and

violence against women and people of color persists. These are the toxic and strange fruit³⁹ of the historical tree of “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”⁴⁰ There is good reason to feel righteous rage.⁴¹ And we who read and write this are far from apolitical.

So, what do we do with the righteous anger we feel seeing black men gunned down in the street by police officers? We organize, and we meditate. We act mindfully, now. We take the paradoxical stance of a Zen warrior.⁴² It is both/and, not either/or, when it comes to the perceived split between direct action and consciousness raising. We work together, better. While working on systemic, structural change we can also cultivate existential, individual change. The two are interconnected and crosspollinating. Change is at home with each other. Change is on the streets, in the ghettos, at the margins—seeping through the deepening fractures. Change is both gradual and sudden.⁴³ Change happens whether we know it or not. We seek to change together, consciously, creatively, poetically, politically amidst the chaos, as we continue to fall apart.⁴⁴ ■

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NOTES

1. The authors would like to dedicate this paper to Ruth Bader Ginsburg. May we, as a species, live up to her example of what we can do and become.
2. Kenneth Burke, “Terministic Screens,” in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), 44.
3. Kamo no Chōmei, “Record of the Ten-Foot-Square Hut,” in *Four Huts: Asian Writings on the Simple Life*, trans. Burton Watson (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2002), 43.
4. Burton Watson, *Four Huts: Asian Writings on the Simple Life* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2002): 43.
5. Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man without A Country* (New York: Random House, 2007).
6. www.ncpedia.org/grandfather-mountain
7. Chris Patti, “Slow Reading & Recovery: Tales of Educational Trauma & Transformation,” *Communication Education* (forthcoming).
8. At the annual meeting of the Southern States Communication Association.
9. Kenneth Burke, “Perspective as Metaphor: Illustrations of Perspective by Incongruity,” in *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd edition (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 89.
10. At the International Association of Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry Symposium honoring the careers of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner.
11. The home purchase was made possible by the historically low fixed mortgage rates during the pandemic.
12. Gayatri Spivak used this phrase when speaking at Appalachian State University in 2015.
13. Burke, *Terministic Screens*, 54.
14. Robert Bringham, *The Tree of Meaning: Language, Mind, and Ecology* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2008), 59.

15. Walter Lippman, "Stereotypes," in *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 53.
16. Chris recalls first hearing this definition of history as an undergraduate in professor Ray Lacoste's Comic Spirit class, at Cal State University, Long Beach.
17. Burke, *Permanence and Change*.
18. Clifford Geertz, *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
19. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*.
20. Bringham, *The Tree of Meaning*, 59.
21. Burke wrote *Permanence and Change* in the Great Depression. He refers to the book as "inquiry into the process of transformation itself" (xlvi).
22. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, lvi.
23. Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Language," in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 7.
24. Burke, *Terministic Screens*, 53.
25. Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.
26. Burke, *Terministic Screens*, 54–55
27. Good thing they don't tend to read our work. Back off, Jeff.
28. We mean this term in the rhetorical and Buddhist senses, not the contemporary American political sense.
29. This insight comes from the authors' good friend and relational communication expert Jamie Wiles.
30. Burke, *Terministic Screens*, 56.
31. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, credits M. Bergson for this insight.
32. The research from the Gottman Institute (<https://www.gottman.com/about/research>) shows that 5:1 is a healthy positive to negative interaction ratio for couples. Abby and Chris identify as having more of a 200:1 dynamic and recommend such.
33. This is the term John Gottman often uses.
34. John M. Gottman, James D. Murray, Catherine C. Swanson, Rebecca Tyson, and Kristin R. Swanson, *The Mathematics of Marriage: Dynamic Nonlinear Models* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).
35. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 66
36. Mark Epstein, *The Trauma of Everyday Life* (New York: Penguin, 2014).
37. With love for Chris Cornell and all those we have lost to suicide. For information on the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, visit <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org> or call 800-273-8255.
38. www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDhh3Dfbico
39. www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DGY9HvChXk
40. bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.
41. French-born child survivor of the Holocaust Manuel Goldberg (https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/177) spoke passionately about this kind of righteous, justifiable rage—that he felt toward Hitler and the Nazis—for murdering his father, millions of other Jews, and others. Today, many Black, Brown, native, and disabled Americans (among billions of others globally) and their allies feel a similar justifiable rage. It is on this razor's edge—of rage and love—that we invite each other to dance.
42. Chris credits professor Marc Rich, at California State University, Long Beach, for teaching him this paradoxical performative stance.
43. Chogyam Trungpa, *Crazy Wisdom* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001).
44. Pema Chodron, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1997).