

It's Turtles All The Way Down

by [Carl Nelson](#) (April 2020)



Turtle Motif, Tommi Parzinger, 1950s

I told my wife that I was to trying to write an essay which is more like a poem, which could be very good even though you can't entirely capture its meaning. She laughed. –the

Author

One realizes with age that it is impossible to state anything clearly without leaving an awful lot out. Consider just one sentence for example: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." This is one of the more inclusive sentences in English, as it comes closest to achieving its objective, which is its effort to incorporate most of the letters of the alphabet into a short sentence—and therefore useful as a typing exercise. Note though that the sentence says nothing about cheese, cedar trees, the present state of our civil discourse, let alone our burgeoning technological development, bit coins, nor cellular phones. Literally a world of things has been left out. From which one comes to the conclusion that a sentence's scope must be quite slim indeed, for any clarity to come from it. And that seems to be the way things work. An essay is clear only in so far as its paragraphs are also clear, and in so far as the overall theme connecting the succession of paragraphs is clear, in so far as the entire topic for discussion is quite frugally defined and all of it assembled from clear sentences. A rule of thumb seems to be that the clearest thought is often the narrowest thought—when trying to get across anything short of a religious experience.

One sees evidence of this in public speaking where the message might take quite a bit of time, whereas the material covered is rather sparse, and even more so as it is often repeated several times. One Atlanta theater director I heard speak, who had to speak publicly quite often, noted that it was best—if one wanted to influence an audience—to focus on the few things one wanted to get across—and then to repeat this thought over in various manifestations, throughout the allotted period of

time. That is: Repetition x Duration x Focus = Audience Receptivity. In short, there is a lot in public discourse akin to pounding a nail into someone's head.

If there is anything a nail speaks of, it is to attachment. These things an audience responds to, such as a speaker who says with confidence that only change can bring about a better world is quite compelling. Hammering it in repetitively creates the security of a nursery rhyme, as we realize what is coming as well as what has been. Wanting a better world is social glue on a big sign and insisting upon it is a bigger nail with a heavier hammer.

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Such an attachment is also very entitling, as who but the 'good guys' would not want a better world? Well, divisive, self-centered, hateful sorts, that is the bad guys wouldn't want a better world—which draws the line with a very tight focus indeed. One might even characterize it as a noose. And with this symbol of a lynching we arrive at cancel culture. Cancel culture is as hung from the rational process, as the period is to the end of this sentence. One naturally swings from the other.

Cancel cultures like socialisms and communism (and paragraphs) preen themselves upon their modernity and post-modernity by binding their audience in full visual rictus forward towards a

very 'rational' vision of human progress—while they turn us away from impediments, such as satisfactions which bind us to the here and now. There is a forward momentum to rational thought, an "if, and then" sexual coupling bent on the need to achieve climax—the last word with a period—by the end of the sentence. Time to a rationalist is a sentence, a time spent in Purgatory, whose purpose is to end. How often must a Progressive suffer fools to "get to the point," or to cite their sources? Time is precious, after all, when a more perfect future waits.

Nothing can get you called out as a Progressive/rationalist faster than *satisfactions*, such as in our traditions, our history, our shared culture and even in our day to day lives. And it's prudent for the rational Progressive to have nothing to do with these sorts of satisfactions. An aspiring Progressive, who is really on their game, must be disaffected, greatly disenchanted, and have been disabused of any good feeling towards anything normative—if they are to enjoy any prospects. A steadfast Progressive who, having found themselves absently enjoying the traditional, must react as if they had casually stepped in dog sh*t, and then embarrassingly tracked it everywhere. Apologies are hardly enough.

Even wisdom is expected by the Progressive to hurry up and explain itself.

Youth tend to imagine their wisdom rather than learn, partly because the raw materials of their experience are limited. And partly because imagination appears miraculous, (more so than most religions, I'd guess), appears easier than diligence—and plays well with alcohol.

And when it comes to birthing wisdom, there are all sorts. There is the wisdom youth will flock to, and there is the wisdom adults—like war veterans—will keep to themselves. There is the wisdom people will jump to hear, and the wisdom which can get you disliked—at the very least—or that can lose you your job or even your freedom, health or life at the furthest end of the scale. Wisdom can be like the shoreline and look quite different when the tide is in than when it is out. Likewise, it is often much easier to see things more clearly in the beginning, than in the end. For example, saying “I love you” or “I trust you” can be much easier to gush in the throes of early acquaintance than after one’s later divorce. Youth characteristically uses broad statements to verbalize limited understandings, while age characteristically uses terse statements to verbalize broad understanding. There’s the story of Ezra Pound listening to an enthusiast gush about the intellectual allure of fishing. “To really understand fishing you must first put yourself in the mind of a fish!” The fellow declared.

To which Ezra replied, “Yes, that’s how I’ve always imagined it.”

As we imagine, our knowledge would seem to increase exponentially, especially if we were to blend into this all of what we’ve heard or read. But, as we see what is revealed with the advent of the years, our conceived and received knowledge retreats as our endured knowledge increases. Like the tide going out, with age our ocean of received knowledge gradually recedes as our breadth of experience increases. Likewise, the nature of our wisdom also changes. There is a time in life to get things done, and then there is the time left to evaluate

what hasn't worked. Often things don't look quite as rosy after the tide has gone out, when the sparkling waters reveal the bottom muck. What has been lost in rosiness though might have gained a bit in depth of understanding about life and death, "the grit and slog of it," enduring beauty, and the perplexity of making any sure statement, or building anything for sure upon whatever you figured you knew. And life might look rather chaotic—and sober coincidentally. But I am thinking finally here of the myriads of tide pools and bottom dwelling rock encrusting creatures suddenly appearing for study once the received knowledge has been pulled away. Here's an example, (for which you may have been thirsting).

When I was young and trying to make my way as a visual artist, I first tried to make a living by doing portraits. In order to better my draftsmanship, I took to life drawing sessions wherever offered. And this in turn threw me into a group of artists quite outside of the mainstream, who met and genuflected to different masters and traditions than those laid down through the evolution of art as taught in the Universities, from the Renaissance, through the Realists and Impressionists up through the Conceptual Art Movement which was then at its apogee. Instead, certain of their conversations centered around the school of Nikolai Fetchin and his student Sergei Bongart, with whom several of them had studied, or with one of Sergei's students, Del Gish. They were very much off the map as I had received it. They admired fine line drawing but practiced a rather trowelled post-impressionism—with a pinch of fauve—and shared a penchant for posed Native Americans.

And when I began doing portraits in the malls, I found the group affinities of the artists also there exploded. There were printmakers, nature photographers, a whole school of Orca

lovers, the unicorn crowd, the painters who sold lower-priced printed reproductions, even the school of a watercolorist who did only ducks flying over fences to land on ponds. (Some specialized in them taking off.) They sold everything from coffee cups to postcards of their work. It was as if the art world had disintegrated into a welter of feudal states, often suspicious of the others, and many of which had only the most tentative knowledge of the Western Canon. My received knowledge was rubbing off and this experience was showing through. Art had become a phantasmagoria. I had fallen in with *Populists*.

Populists are everywhere, and oftentimes—with their chaotic, irrational endeavors—turn some real coin. Nevertheless, they are held in some disrepute by the brahmins of the art world in a way such as salespeople are disrespected by engineers. Though the salesperson might make three times the income of the engineer, nevertheless, salespeople are still generally held by engineers to be empty heads who excel at bullshit. They share many pejoratives with the Deplorables and know-nothings as described by the Progressive elites.

Populists are often simply canceled by our dominant cultural ethos with its rational imperatives. Brahmins and their mandarins generally make sure to scrape any populism off their shoes before crafting any upper tier statement.

The American Left's critical action of "cancelling" the irrational might have grown more visible of late, but it didn't start recently and has a history going way back to that first tasty "crunch" of the apple. For example, Rod McKuen, an extremely successful poet with over 100 million recordings and over 60 million books sold, first recorded this version of "If

"You Go Away" in April, 1966 and performed it live at Carnegie Hall, April 29, 1969. Listen to it.

Leonard Cohen, whose lifetime paralleled Rod McKuen's, began his musical career fairly late for a performer, beginning to write in 1967 and being first recorded in 1969. After graduating from McGill University and trying his hand at writing poetry and fiction, he decided abruptly to head to New York and make his career as a songwriter—a decision he later characterized at his late age of 33 as a rather reckless thing to do, a complete toss of the dice. Listen to him.

Leonard Cohen's success was nearly immediate, both popularly and critically. McKuen's earlier and even more numerous successes were vilified by the critics. Rod McKuen was quite a warm performer who found satisfaction in his affections and sufferings, whereas Cohen was the bard of gloom. Canadian critic-poet Douglas Fetherling has suggested that Leonard Cohen is "what Rod McKuen might have come up with if he'd been an artist". But when you listen to "If You Go Away" as performed by McKuen, it's impossible not to hear Leonard Cohen's style virtually walking out of McKuen's skin, as if Leonard were a butterfly—okay, a moth—freed from McKuen's chrysalis. I've yet to find any reference in Leonard Cohen's debt to Rod McKuen, though it's impossible to believe that Leonard had not heard McKuen perform. Instead, it appears that Cohen added another floor to the house that McKuen built, where Leonard Cohen was careful to wipe his feet before entering, and the critics changed the address.

On a complimentary note, when I was formerly a medical student on surgical rounds, we came to the door of an older post-op patient. I peered in through the door at him while the Attending, Head Resident, Resident, Intern, and Nursing Supervisor recounted the patient's history and treatment out in the hall. It seems he had been fighting for his life through a couple months of hospitalization. He appeared as a shrunken, yellowed husk of a man with a grey moustache, who appeared as if in a sepia print of an immigrant logger lying prone in the notch of an enormous old growth to be photographed for posterity. Apparently the old fellow was tough as nails and wouldn't die. "We've done everything, and frankly we're at the bottom of our bag of tricks," the Head Resident summarized finally. "There's nothing more for us to try, so the question is, should he be taken off code?"

The nursing supervisor was adamant that they needed to keep the fellow on full code alert. "We've grown very attached to this patient. We've really gone to the wall for him, and if you take him off code it's just going to kill our morale." She broke into tears while speaking. The talk went back and forth with the conversation between the Head Resident and the Nurse resembling somewhat that of an uncomfortable family meeting about putting down the dog. As these things will go, after everyone had said and re-stated every possible tactic which could be uttered regarding the present conundrum, the Attending turned to the least member of the group, me, the medical student, to ask what I thought?

I looked at the patient again, and though he had lots of tubes and drains coming from him, there was nothing blocking his mouth. "Could we ask him?" I ventured hesitantly.

This turned out to be the crowning triumph of my personal diagnostic technique and medical style—which was to just stare at the patient until a notion appeared.

It was decided to do just that. The Head Resident spoke to the patient that afternoon. He recounted a very moving conversation the next morning on rounds. The patient stated very emphatically that he wanted to keep on fighting. He remained on code. And the following day, he died.

I would suggest that all rational thought is directed thought, which is either willfully or unintentionally despotic or cancelling. In the minute we craft a sentence we begin crafting our despotism. This seems a natural prejudice of consciousness, and as such there is nothing much to be done about it but to be aware and acknowledge that movements which pride themselves on rational thought rather than reasonable results, such as Progressivism, have the totalitarian state as their necessary end. Plus, ironically, there is the problem of continued progress itself, as cancel culture exhausts the community history from which to steal and cancel. Its youth are taught an airbrushed knowledge of very low resolution. When they do try to expand upon it, everything pixilates, or fails to reproduce. Their photoshopped notions are useless as building materials.

The problem (or rather an answer, depending) is that there are two sorts of clarity. There is the clarity of rational thought, which is actually the clarity of focus, of the elimination of choices. As I've discussed above, sentences are constructed to do much of this. Simply by their size and

syntax sentences form the fine screen of thought. Nothing larger gets through; nothing smaller is intelligible. We sift our thought until just the right sized building blocks of a comprehensible argument are there, ready as material for your uses. And then we mortar our essay by a narrative scheme of a sort. But how do we know our essay or argument is complete?

Well, we might so finely focus our essay that we finally reach some consensus concerning the number of angels dancing on the head of a pin—in short, towards that point where we are certain about nothing and must take the answer on faith. Such is the religion of ‘isms’.

Or, our essay is finished when it feels done. That is, we experience a religious ‘feeling’ of clarity.

When we have a religious *feeling* of clarity, we are experiencing that second sort of clarity which rather than being focused, is global in nature. For unlike logic, which is necessarily focused and eliminates, feeling is unfocused and includes. To quote Leonard Cohen: “A scheme is not a vision.” Or, as they appear in this essay: logic is a scheme; religion is a vision. We have a *feeling* of clarity when it seems as though all possibilities have been included and all of the evidence allowed. The entire mind has voted. Once feeling has been allowed into our essay, it can really go to work—for good, or ill.

For example, you might rightly (or wrongly) *feel* that your rational argument is flawless, even in the face of someone pointing out otherwise. Because, they *feel* you have missed an

important point. But do they have the right to feel so? Well, unless the only things we are able to be certain about is nothing, then yes.

This gets quite muddled! What to do?

Well. We can do what the Progressive brahmins do and quote from the edicts of Post-Modernism, in which case the problem will clarify into power relationships with their ever present politics, or “war by other means.”

Or, we can do what Populists do, which is to open their King James Version of the Bible to First Corinthians: 1: 18-31, from which I quote a bit here:

¹⁸ For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹ For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

...

²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble,

are called:

²⁷ But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

²⁸ And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

It should be apparent for these reasons, that there can be better and worse religions—and also, how providential it might be to enjoy the best one. The best Messiah is invaluable.

Years ago in Seattle, I lived in the demographically very mixed neighborhood of Columbia City in the Rainier Valley. In this area there was a small shop front “neighborhood city hall,” an innovation pioneered by the then current Democratic mayor to make the government more accessible and user-friendly. I went in one morning to request a “mini can.” I didn’t want to pay the full garbage fee and I hadn’t had any luck getting this accomplished over the phone. Instead I ended up like an intruder ensnared in the razor wire of their bureaucratic voice mail and left to bleed out.

This neighborhood “city hall” was no more than a slot in the wall. Cramped with two plastic chairs and a wall rack full of informational material, there was one anonymous door leading further back I’d suppose, and a receptionist’s area which was surrounded by a wall made of wooden posts and two inch Plexiglas. There were other signs and posters telling people what to do in case of various inquiries and several in bold print detailing behavior which would lead to severe legal

penalties including arrest and imprisonment. To speak with the woman inside, who was polishing her nails, I had to bow and speak through a hole. "So you want your mini can," she chuckled, finishing her touch up and reaching for the phone.

"Oh, it won't work to call them," I said. "I've tried that and just got put on hold."

"That's because you don't have the right number."

"What's the right number?" I asked, thinking this would be useful.

"The one I have." She smirked.

Next door was the local coffee shop/restaurant. Three cake donuts and coffee with cream was my morning breakfast. The shop also featured a bakery. The seating area was wide open and airy. I favored the second booth from the door looking out onto the street. I loved watching the people who, having risen, were starting their day. The waitress had recently moved back to Seattle from New Zealand and we discussed this in what amounted to snippets of conversation in the day after day. When I was finished eating, I walked to the cash register near the kitchen and paid. She counted out my change from all the money sitting there in the till and we were smiles all the way 'round. If I were to speculate as to what managed all of this normal but gratifying neighborhood interaction, I'd propose just people going about their normal business. There were understandings but no written rules, which seemed to

gather around what served the people best. And a beauty shown from habitual activities, which I think was what I was staring at out the window each morning—a beauty I tried to accumulate in this poem portion:

Outside.

Where life is a long avenue of haunts,
there is the long thinness of the streets,
lean and underfed, hungry, ravenous,
where the wind whistles and the rain splatters.

Reflections in the windows move like ghosts, as
we sit together through the thin and the thick of it
and feel the street wind its way within us.

The windy path of life with its noise and hustle,
the cold and loneliness, the clatter and rattle of the
trucks,
and the prowl of expensive autos...
the jaywalkers and clinging couples.

Somewhere I read of the experience of Western economists who, following the collapse of Communism in the USSR, were invited to help the Soviets develop a free market economy. After the Western economists had described their thinking to the members

of the Soviet bureau charged with managing the economy, they were met with derisive laughter. “Here we have worked hard and issued literally thousands of directives and memorandum in order to make our economy perform as it has, and you intend to make it perform better by doing nothing?” They were incredulous.

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In the neighborhood city hall next door they had reasons for everything they did. They had a mission statement, guidelines, directives, flyers and brochures outlining opportunities and outreach services, and even information advising you how to best access these services, plus a clerk behind the Plexiglas window to assist. Managing of the affairs and activities was facilitated further through edicts issued from a downtown metropolitan city affairs bureau. An inquiring person, or reporter could be given a lucid justification for everything which took place or was seen there, lubricated by PR. You could probably be given a very rational reason for the necessity of a two-inch Plexiglass barrier and the legal alerts displayed prominently. And it would probably have something to do with the diligence with which they assured the safety of their employees who worked the front lines in some very stressful situations. But the whole situation was ugly. And it attracted ugliness. That was the reason for the legal warnings. And quiet people who enjoyed beauty—excepting the activist types—generally avoided the place.

The restaurant had nothing but their specials posted. Nobody even told you how to pay or that you must pay. People came and went without much direction at all and if you were to question most of the patrons closely, they might be hard pressed to give you certain answers for why the business was conducted and arranged the way it was—short of reasonable guesses.

A comparison of the two side by side shops reminds me of a anecdote detailed by the essayist Theodore Dalrymple in which a philosopher was ridiculing the irrationality of the creational myth in which the world is supposedly supported on the back of an enormous tortoise as it crawls through the heavens. “But of course, we have to ask, what it is that the tortoise stands upon?” The philosopher pondered. To which an older lady in the audience rose to retort, “Well, I’ve got the answer for you there, Mr. Smarty-pants. It’s turtles all the way down.”

So, what is my essay’s purpose? What is my rationale? My point is simple. That whereas rational thought can be useful, it cannot stop. It can only get you somewhere else. This essay would like to get us somewhere closer to the satisfactions of poetry, for “poetry makes nothing happen”; poetry makes things stop. That’s right. Poetry extinguishes nihilism. This second point, like poetry, is my purpose. Poetry, like beauty, can only satisfy—or not. This essay won’t get you anywhere. It’s not a career move. But it might give you permission to feel better, more satisfied with our plight. For if we are never allowed to be satisfied with where we are, what is the point of moving forward?

The natural disconnect between the intelligentsia and populists is humorously characterized for me by this [comment](#)

by theoretical physicist Richard Feynman's mother. "When Richard Feynman's mother Lucille heard that her son, Richard, had been designated the Smartest Man In The World by a magazine (Omni), her response was "Our Richie? The world's smartest man? God help us!"

Might I propose the seemingly rational thought, that at times an irrational solution is the best solution for an irrational problem—such as lives which move in mysterious ways? For what direction do we take as a society when "turtles all the way down" as an explanation seems to humor the inscrutable better than that the snarky criticism of the learned philosopher? The solution to life's problems would seem to me to have something to do with beauty, which is necessary—as compared with ugly, which is not.*

* "Why Beauty Matters" by Dana Gioia, *First Things*, February 18, 2020

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Carl Nelson has recently finished his book, *The Poet's (40 Pound) Weight Loss Plan*, comprised of instructional prose and poetry. Using his method he is walking around forty pounds lighter with normal fasting glucose levels and not snoring, while currently working on a second volume of Self-Help

Poetry, *The Poet's (25 Year) Marriage Plan*. He lives in tiny Belpre, Ohio. He has published plays, poetry, stories and prose in many varied journals but he favors the *New English Review*. To read more about Carl and his work visit [here](#) and [here](#).

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