

This is Not My Beautiful House

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Ann and I have a beautiful house not far from here. Our names are on the deed, but it is not our house. I have a car in my name, but it doesn't belong to me. The money in my bank account is not mine. I do not even really own these clothes I'm wearing.

No, this is not a talk in which I admit to grand theft auto, forgery, or identity theft. Our legal system would assert that my possessions are indeed rightfully mine, but it is that *system* that I want to challenge this morning, and what its spiritual depravity does to us as human beings. Especially human beings in this country, at this time in history, with so. many. possessions. This is not my beautiful house.

If you were an adult in the 80's, right now you may have a Talking Heads song stuck in your head, a song in which David Byrne ominously recites:

You may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful house" and you may tell yourself, "This is not my beautiful wife!" Into the blue again, into the silent water Under the rocks and stones there is water underground, Same as it ever was. Same as it ever was. That's been stuck in my head for the three weeks I've been thinking about this talk, so I'm glad to hand it off to you for a while.

Years ago Ann attended a lecture by Ralph Nader, and she told me about something he did which I'll repeat now: Bring to mind the most valuable thing you own. Go ahead, take some time; the most valuable thing you own is ...

Now, raise your hand if the thing you have in mind is the National Mall, or Grand Canyon, the Hubble Space Telescope, or the U.S. Military. No? We do own these things as U.S. citizens... Why don't we feel that? I have a guess: it's because we have a perversely limited notion of ownership that is personal, private, and one that both exploits and elevates our fear of being vulnerable. It makes us yet more vulnerable even as we cling to our hollow icons of security, like my beautiful house.

I am living the American Dream. Ann and I are fairly comfortable even on our school-teachers' salaries. We each have a car that works, we can afford to eat out every so often, we are saving for retirement, and we can give some money away each year without threatening our survival. We are solidly middle-class, lacking little, and we pat ourselves on the back for being basically good people. And I would be justified in claiming that everything I have came from my own hard work, doggonnit. But it simply isn't true.

I did not earn these things, though I worked hard for them, because achieving

middle-class comfort takes MORE than hard work. It also requires luck. A supportive environment of people and circumstances that acts as a tailwind. An abundance of resources within reach. And a little bit of thieving done before I was born helps, too.

So that beautiful house of mine is built on land taken by trickery and genocide about 300 years ago, and it's made of trees cut from forests that... well, you know the story. It's a long and violent one, celebrated this weekend under the name Columbus Day. A story of crimes oppressing some people and benefiting others, and one that continues today, systematically excluding certain people from accessing resources, while facilitating the access of others. Water flowing underground.

That story boils down to a headwind for some of you, even today, while I enjoyed a nice tailwind for most of my life. This is what we call Privilege, and it suggests that *some* portion of what I have rightfully belongs to someone else.

Many of you have enjoyed my drumming, or at least been afflicted by it once in a while. I was thinking of drums a couple weeks ago when writer and MIT professor Junot Diaz was interviewed by Krista Tippett on her radio show On Being. He said "I'm a child of blackness. Blackness was not meant to survive, and we have survived. And we have thrived. And we've given this world more genius than we have ever received."

My musical contributions are fun for me and, I hope, of value to others, but they are built upon a mountain of genius from an African heritage that is not mine. Even the drums themselves. So; is my music really mine? History suggests that some large measure of it belongs to, or at least should be attributed to, someone else. Who? Maybe lots of people, and maybe historians and politicians will sort that out someday, somehow. But Privilege and appropriation are not really what I'm getting at this morning. They are related, but I think *they* are symptoms of something deeper.

I speak with more authority if I stick to science instead of history. And I want to suggest that the rightful owner of all my stuff is not any person or group of people at all. So what does science have to say about this? As is VERY often the case, poetry is the best port of entry to the realm of physics and cosmology. This time from Khalil Gibran, who wrote:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit, not
even in your dreams.
You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.
You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.
The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and He bends you with
His might that His arrows may go swift and far.
Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness;
For even as he loves the arrow that flies, so He loves also the bow that is
stable.

The poem being about children makes it easy for us, because in our enlightened time we agree that people are not property, even children. But Khalil Gibran's reasoning applies equally well to houses, cars, music, and all of that plastic crap we have in a storage unit somewhere.

Here's what modern physics says: This is not a world of things. This is a world of flow. As Nobel-prize-winning physicist Niels Bohr said "Everything we call real is made of things that cannot be regarded as real." He was using the word "real" as a stand-in for things, objects, tangibles, stuff. He and his generation of physicists had just demonstrated that things are made of atoms, and atoms are made of protons, neutrons, and electrons, and that THOSE are made of... energy. Not tiny little objects that move around energetically, but literally only energy. Movement. Flow. Things are made of relationships between entities that are themselves made of relationships, all the way down; dancing, flowing. Under the rocks and stones, water moving underground.

One of the more compelling slides from my Seven Candles work is of standing waves on a river. The river water flows up and over the hump made by a rock on the bottom, a wave that maintains its form and shape and location, but is made entirely of flowing water. The wave looks the same over time, but is made of different water each moment. While that video plays, I say "Our bodies are like a standing wave on a river; matter moves through you, takes your form briefly, then moves on to become something else for a while. But *you are not the matter that makes up your body. You are the pattern that organizes the matter as it flows through.*"

Every time you eat or breathe or drink or sweat, atoms and molecules flow, in and out, different each moment, just like that standing wave. So, are the carbon dioxide molecules that were part of your brain moments ago but are now over in that corner of the room, are those yours? How about the oxygen molecules that were part of a tree an hour ago, and are just now entering your nostril destined to be part of your brain by the time I finish this sentence? Are those oxygen molecules yours? Whose

are they? Who do they belong to? They are the sons and daughters of Nature's longing for itself.

If there's a case to be made for private ownership, ownership of one's "own" body is the ultimate slam-dunk. What could be more fundamental than the rights associated with my own body? And yet, Ann and I almost didn't make it back from a simple day-hike earlier this summer. For months we planned our climb up Mount Katahdin, Maine's highest peak and the northern end of the Appalachian Trail. We are experienced hikers, we had decent equipment, and are in good shape. We got up early to beat some rain forecast for the afternoon. The rain came early, and of course the forecast from the Weather Channel didn't include the likely temperatures on top of the highest mountain in the state.

We soon found ourselves clambering up and down large boulders in freezing rain, pelting us in a 50-mile-an-hour wind. We both lost control of our fingers due to cold, which hampered our ability to manage our clothing, most of which got soaked in spite of our rain gear. This normally-moderate 10-mile hike ended up taking us nearly 13 hours, and for some of those hours I was pondering how long it would take park rangers to find our bodies, and how our families would handle the news of our pointless deaths.

Is it really my body, my life? Or has it always been the earth's, on loan, to take back at any time. Sure, I get to manage or mis-manage it, just like a line of credit from a bank, but it was never mine, really. This is not my beautiful house.

Until a month ago, the people of Houston, Florida and Puerto Rico believed, as most of us do, that they *owned* their houses and the stuff inside them. And in one week, the earth called in thousands of outstanding loans. It is part of our culture to seek security, however fictional and temporary, and the hard-ingrained notion of private ownership is one expression of that. It is enshrined in our constitution. Uncountable legal documents, deeds, titles, bills of sale, argumentation, case law, acts of congress, and on and on testify to its hold on our psyches.

And yet, its fictional nature is quickly exposed when we consider riparian water rights. This is a branch of law stretching way back to English common law, which recognizes that a stream flowing through my property is not mine but is rather a public good like the air. Well, trees and soil and rocks and houses flow through the property too, just more slowly. Our culture claims I own them, but they're not mine. They are on loan. I just manage them. Water flowing through.

Wendell Berry is the source for one expression of this: "The earth is not given by our fathers; it is borrowed from our children."

For a longer perspective, science takes us back to the beginning of time. Everything we have and are and become is made of energy from the Big Bang, energy concentrated to make up every atom existing today. That energy made everything from atoms to entire worlds all by itself for nearly 14 billion years before we came along. How absurd to claim some of it as “ours”! Does a drop of water own the river? Does the river own the ocean?

Being alive bestows on us a limited ability, to manage a limited amount of that big-bang energy, for a very limited time. It was never ours. The belief that we own stuff clouds our ability to see reality, the reality that our stewardship is always temporary. That every thing we have represents a loan and a responsibility, and that the future ALWAYS demands a return of those things to their true owner, an archer which sees the mark upon the path of the infinite, and bends us to let fly those arrows that we pretend to possess ourselves.

Our deep faith in the pretense of ownership allows us to think that it's normal and healthy for multi-billionaires to burden their children with obscene wealth, completely un-earned, and often spiritually and psychologically damaging to them and their contemporaries. So normal that almost everyone leaves their assets to their children, telescoping social inequities through generations, centuries even. It allows us to accept without outrage the outrageous behavior of those who devastate millions of acres of pristine forest ecosystems to scrape out a meager profit from tar sands, or mountain-top removal mining, or who buy and sell access to air, water, and land stolen from others.

It gives us a sense of entitlement, especially for middle class people, that too often makes me act like a spoiled selfish brat when I don't get what I want; when I don't get my way, when I don't get the special treatment I think I deserve. It encourages us to worship money, and consumer goods, and to spend our lives accumulating plastic crap and oversized garages to fill up with piles of stuff we hope will fill the awful emptiness in our souls.

Later in the summer (after Katahdin) Ann and I attended the annual conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science on Star Island. I met and befriended a woman about my age named Aaloka. Aaloka has lived about half her life in India and the other half in Toronto. One day she took me to task about the arrogance of “You, White, People.” She was speaking from a place of pure love, and I knew that. I also knew Aaloka well enough by then to know she had wisdom to share if I would just shut up and listen. So I shut up and listened.

She said, “You in the West have all the material possessions anyone could dream of, but spiritually you are in deep poverty, so deep that you can't even see how impoverished you are. You come to a small Indian village, and all you see is bare feet

and dirt floors, and dry farmland. For some reason you do not see the wide smiles, the happiness, people loving and supporting one another, contentment, devotion. You set about to fix what isn't broken, and in the process, you destroy it." I'm paraphrasing; we spoke for about an hour, and she influenced my perspective profoundly. Mind you, by "spirituality" Aaloka does not necessarily mean supernatural beliefs. She's talking about lifestyle values like gratitude, humility, acceptance, mindfulness, groundedness, community, vulnerability. To be rich in these is to be spiritually wealthy. We are so poor.

Is there ANYTHING I can truly call mine? Yes, and Aaloka might say it's the most important thing. It's this. Not this thing, or these things, or these people, but this experience. This moment. And this one. And this one. Exquisite pearls moment by moment threaded onto the necklace of my life. Truly unique, truly mine, provided I don't miss them while shopping, or obsessing about all my stuff.

Make no mistake, I'm not arguing for public control of property, or some form of communism. That would simply shift the fiction of ownership from the individual to the group. I'm saying that our myths of possession and property poison our souls, corrupting us spiritually by distancing us from the constant flow of reality. I am arguing for humility, the kind of humility that acknowledges our vulnerability and our interdependence with every one and every thing else. An acceptance that the wealth and comfort I have is NOT all the product of my own personal labor. Which acknowledges that I am embedded in an interdependent web of existence which supplies everything I have, and to which I OWE everything I have. The most gracious and healthy response I can think of to my comfortable lifestyle is gratitude coupled with continuous generosity, continuously paying forward into the flow of existence. As may be obvious, I fail in this, mostly.

So this is an appeal to all of us, but myself especially, for frequently asking "How shall I steward this bounty that is not mine?" For fully embodying the Trustee role, asking "What is the highest possible use for the resources that I control, not for me personally, but for their true owner, Nature herself?" For the great-great grandchildren I love but will never meet. For the seventh generation of YOUR descendants, who I also already love. For those who will live 1000, or a million years from now.

This is not my beautiful house.

This is not *my* beautiful wife.

Under the rocks and stones there is water underground, Into the blue again, into the silent water

Same as it ever was. Same as it ever was.

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