

The Sacred, Part 2: Possibility / Thoughts of the Gods

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To give a lecture on a subject with meaning as slippery (and usage as ubiquitous) as sacredness, I search for inspiration among many books. But there is one writer in particular that I find myself returning to often: Robert Bringhurst. His writing builds on profound literary, mythological, and philosophical accomplishments in history, connecting deeply to the soft sage mosses of the earth and the full expanse of the cosmos.

Robert Bringhurst shows us the sacred in ourselves by showing us sacredness in poetry. He once wrote that poetry—art—is “thinking deeply and beautifully.” Such thinking over historical time is the expansion of the human imagination, the evolution of new realms for thinking—like nuclear fission, perhaps, or, more gradually, like rhizomes that dig deep new roots and break the surface again and again. Just as atoms and cells divide and multiply, so too do new spaces of knowledge in the trajectory of human existence.

Our imagination is the most profound aspect of our being, originary to our existence as a species and world-shaping in the most expansive sense. Imagination is *a priori* to ourselves; it is on invention and reinvention that our knowledge of self depends. And that continual renewal and nourishing of the self is the continual renewal and nourishing of our sacredness. The self, the sacred, and the imagination exist in harmonic relation.

Ursa Major

Many unconnected cultures and civilizations across the world have imagined the Big Dipper/Ursa Major constellation as a bear. It appears in dozens of ancient mythologies. Some linguists account for this by showing evidence of a common linguistic tradition during the Paleolithic era (over 10,000 years ago) but there is little evidence to support

this so-called Paleolithic Continuity Theory.¹ In ancient Japanese Ainu, bears were considered to be gods who have come to earth disguised as bears only to discover when they arrive that they are not able to shed their bear costumes; their emancipation depends on humans who sacrifice them in order to send them back to the realms of the gods.² They are literally ‘made sacred’. Carefully arranged piles of bear skulls were discovered in mountain-top caves as evidence of Neanderthal ritualistic bear sacrifices dating to 250,000–50,000 BCE.

In *Ursa Major, a Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers* (Gaspereau Press 2009), Bringhurst weaves together mythologies from disparate cultures into a universal story of the creation of the bear constellation.³ Drawing from Roman and Greek mythologies and from Cree storytelling, Bringhurst creates a contemporary, global *Catasterismi*, a collection of interrelated mythological narratives explaining the origins of star constellations. In Bringhurst’s poetic account of the origin of Ursa Major, the characters across the narrative strands speak to and over each other in numerous languages: Hera curses Ovid’s Daughter while Kâ-kîsikâw-pihtokêw’s Son tries to be heard over the voices of Arcturus and the Celestial Janitor. Callisto, the Moon-Woman, and the Star-Bearer dance together while the Translator attempts an English interpretation of it all. In this *Polyphonic Masque for Speakers and Dancers*, the speaking isn’t dialogic but simultaneous and antiphonal. When performed, as it was in Regina in 2002, the audience is urged by the artist to have “merely a willingness to watch and think and listen.”⁴ The

kind of ‘thinking’ he refers to depends as much on ‘watching’ the dance as on ‘listening’ to the narratives and the vocal musicality. The voices and movements alternate between coherence, cacophony, and dissonance—much like one experiences when immersed in foreign languages and unfamiliar cultures.

Bringhurst’s *Ursa Major* provokes deep thinking on the sacred with its poetic voice (as text, music, and dance), with its mythological subject matter, and with the universality of its knowledge of being and imagination. It lends new meaning to traces of imaginative insight across millennia and across worlds.

The poem-performance begins with Roman myths recounted in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, told in Latin fragments by Ovid’s Daughter against a backdrop of Hera’s curses in Greek and the Translator’s English. The Roman and Greek myths converge in the story of Callisto’s cursed transmogrification into a bear wandering the Arcadian forest, followed by her fateful conveyance to the sky as Ursa Major, Bear-Woman.

When the Roman sky god Jupiter (Zeus, in Greek mythology) discovers Callisto alone, separated from the other virgin nymphs, he seduces her. Months later, when Jupiter’s wife Juno (Hera, in Greek mythology) learns that Callisto is carrying Jupiter’s child, she seeks revenge for the infidelity by turning Callisto into a bear. Years later, Callisto’s son, Arkas, is hunting in the forest and just before he unwittingly spears his mother the bear-woman, Jupiter mercifully places Callisto in the sky as

1. Mario Alinei, *Interdisciplinary and linguistic evidence for Palaeolithic continuity of Indo-European, Uralic and Altaic populations in Eurasia, with an excursus on Slavic ethnogenesis*, a paper delivered at the Conference of Ancient Settlers in Europe, Kobariid, 29-30 May 2003.
2. Joseph Campbell, *Myths We Live By*, Penguin, 1972, 33.
3. Vernacularly known as the Big Dipper.
4. Robert Bringhurst, *Ursa Major*, Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2011, 7.

Ursa Major, the Bear-Woman, (Arctos, in Greek mythology) and Arkas as Ursa Minor, the Bear-Guardian (Arcturus, in Greek Mythology).

Rather than maintain the coherence of the Roman narrative by referring solely to the Roman names of the gods (Callisto, Jupiter, and Juno), Bringhurst blurs it with the Greek story of Hera, goddess of women, raging at the setting apart of Callisto as an untouchable bear-woman, lifted out of the profane wilderness of Arcadia into the sacred pool of the sky.

Providing philosophical commentary is Arcturus (Arkas), son of Callisto (Arctos) and the guardian of the bear constellation.⁵ Arcturus' role seems to be that of sense-making, suggesting some threads to follow: "Did you know that all those stars were people once?...Those stars are the plants and animals of the sky."⁶

Offering a dispassionate cosmic counterpoint is the Celestial Janitor, the one who takes stock of

All those inorganic proteins:
the orthogonal, hexagonal,
simple, symmetrical,
latticed, rotational
thoughts of the gods,
that twist with their milk-smooth
faces and crystalline edges
in the breasts of human beings.⁷

The 'proteins' of celestial bodies, of the Ursa constellations, are pronounced inorganic, mathematical, geometrical—metaphors for the

rationalism of the thoughts of the gods. But then Bringhurst tells us—using the vocabulary of Classical aesthetics that sought glimpses of the divine in milk-smooth marble faces and sculpted breasts—the gods exist not in the transcendental sacred pool of the sky but in the minds and organic bodies of human beings. The thoughts of the gods are the deep and beautiful thoughts of our own imaginations, and there we find the sacred in ourselves.

I return often to Bringhurst's writing: poetic attention is our only hope for a glimpse of the divine. In a particular insight on thinking, Arcturus laments or boasts:

My mother is a woman of both worlds,
with no escape from feeling or from thinking.⁸

Ursa Major, the bear-mother of both worlds, never dips below the horizon—Juno pleaded with Oceanus, in Ovid's words, never to "allow that whore to taint the waters of your sacred stream"⁹—and so, in the northern hemisphere she remains ever visible as a beacon to feeling and thinking—to imagining. She sustains her poetic attention on the world. She carries on as a provocation for storytelling, for incredible reaching of the imagination.

In *Ursa Major*, the Cree story is a slightly adapted version of one written down by Leonard Bloomfield in 1925 by dictation from Kâ-kîsikâw-pîhtokêw (Coming-Day) of the Sweet Grass Cree in Saskatchewan. He tells about a lonely hunter who dreams each day of finding somebody at his home when he returns. One day he discovers a handsome

5. There is some ambiguity between the mythological reference to Arcturus as Ursa Minor, the son of the bear-woman, and the common reference to Arcturus as the Classical name of a star in the Boötes constellation just below Ursa Major. The star is the brightest in the northern hemisphere and fourth brightest in the sky. To find the star, follow the handle of the Big Dipper, and as the saying goes, "Arc to Arcturus, then spike to Spica."

6. Bringhurst, 29.

7. Bringhurst, 31.

8. Bringhurst, 30.

9. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 72.

woman cooking and she tells him about her people who are starving. Over a few days, she cooks up huge quantities of buffalo for them to carry a great distance to her elders but when the day of their journey arrives, the hunter wonders how they will carry it all, not having any way to transport so great a bounty. The woman tramples the food packages and their belongings, and magically it all disappears. When they arrive at her camp, she stomps her feet and all the belongings drop to the floor. “Then he knew that she, the woman, as it seemed to him, whom he had to wife, was a bear, and that also the old man and the old woman were bears. And he was sorry that he could not always be with them. That is the end of this sacred story.”¹⁰

The bear-woman of Greek mythology and the bear-woman of the Sweet Grass Cree exist in both worlds; she is both sacred and profane. She is imagined into being and set apart in the sky. And she is present, she is of the earth, living in a coulee on the prairies of Saskatchewan.

Finally, Arcturus, in his concluding speech, ties the mythological threads together:

Humans can eat and sleep with the gods,
and bear their children. Still they can be just a
breath away
from being rocks and trees and wolves and deer
and bears and stars and darkness. Just a breath
away
from deathlessness, and just a breath away
from all that darkness in between the stars.¹¹

The darkness *in between* is possibility—the metaphorical stars that have yet to be formed from what is. What Ursa Major represents is possibility actualized: a constellation of stars that happen to shine from their various galaxies in a particular pattern very loosely suggestive of an animal becomes a world-shaping metaphor over millennia, a manifestation of our search for meaning, of our insatiable desires, and of our futile struggle for immortality.

The Sacred as a Topic of Inquiry

Philosophical and theological thinking has often addressed the *nature* of our search for sacredness and the sacred (i.e. as religion) but far less often is an inquiry made into the *fact* of our search for the sacred: Why do we humans even have the concept of sacredness within our realm of inquiry? Where did this impulse come from? In answering this question, Thought must embrace both Reason’s causal interpretation of the world and Imagination’s contingent interpretation of the world. Whereas Reason tells us *what is* because of its knowledge of what is, Imagination tells us *what can be* because of its knowledge of what is. Imagination is contingent on what is and then formulates possibilities. Roberto Mangabeira Unger refers to this as the Machine and the Anti-Machine.¹²

The fact of our search for the sacred finds its basis in the three inescapable flaws of our human

10. Leonard Bloomfield, “The Bear-Woman,” dictation by Coming-Day, *Sacred Stories of the Sweet Grass Cree*, Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, 1930. 57.

11. Bringhurst, 49.

12. Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *False Necessity*, New York: Verso, 2004, 153.

condition, described by Unger in *The Religion of the Future*. Unger articulates them to show how we must embrace the very *inescapability* of these flaws in order to save ourselves, but here I'd like to describe how the flaws themselves proffer the concept of sacredness to our imagination. The sacred becomes the subject of our desire to overcome our belittled human condition: our mortality, our insatiability, and our groundlessness. Humanity's impulse toward the sacred is, in the words of Virgil, its *lacrimae rerum*, accepting the great sadness of human existence.¹³

Our mortality is the ultimate losability of the world, referred to in the previous chapter. Our lives are a gradual loss of the world, an embodied decay, a decaying body that plunges forward to the inevitable end of consciousness. That plunge is set against the backdrop of the known world which is itself decaying, driven in part by the second of our flaws—our insatiability—and, of course, by the flaws of the laws of nature by which we are also governed.

Our insatiability accelerates the losability of the world as we consume the earth's resources, but it is also our creative impulse to imagine new possibilities for the world. We always desire more, leading us on a destructive and violent contest toward satiation. But this insatiability also lends us our capacity to save ourselves and the world through our desire-driven imaginative foresight.

Our groundlessness undergirds our desire to find a home in a world that resists its losability. We lack a home in that we lack the ability to fathom fully the

nature, totality, or meaning of existence. We aren't even sure we belong in and to the world.

We have already established the concurrent presence of the sacred and the imagination in our individual selves: our capacity to grasp ever greater heights of world-shaping understanding is driven by our insatiable desire to perpetuate ourselves even while we plunge headlong toward oblivion. The very fact that we must die is also the very reason that *homo sapiens* evolved a capacity for imaginative inquiry into the complex workings of human spirit.

The Soul as Embodied Spirit

I was raised (as are many in southern Alberta) with the religious worldview of the Protestant Reformer John Calvin. His theology first took hold in the sixteenth century in Switzerland where he wrote his seminal text, *Institutes for the Christian Religion* (1536). Although I am an ex-Calvinist now, and my writing on sacredness is fully intended to present an understanding that is opposed, or at least alternative, to religion, we can gain some insight into the impulse toward sacredness—the *why* of our being—when we take a look at Calvin's characterization of the soul:

The manifold agility of the soul, which enables it to take a survey of heaven and earth; to join past and present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago; to conceive of whatever it chooses by the help of the imagination; its ingenuity also in the invention of such

13. *Lacrimae rerum* is Latin for "the tears of things" in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

admirable arts, are certain proofs of the divinity of man.¹⁴

Certes une telle agilité, et si diverse que nous voyons en l'ame à circuir le ciel et la terre, conjoindre les choses passées avec celles qui sont à venir, avoir tousjours mémoire de ce qu'elle aura ouy de long temps, mesmes se figurer ce que bon luy semble, est une certaine marque de divinité en l'homme. Autant en est-il de la dextérité de savoir inventer choses incroyables : comme de fait on la peut appeler Mère de merveilles, en ce qu'elle a produit tous ars.¹⁵

I have never encountered a more perfect definition of the soul, or sacredness, than Calvin's elegant connection to imagination, beauty, memory, reason, and divinity. In the original French he refers to the arts as the 'Mère de merveilles', the Mother of Wonders. His definition aligns nicely with the three Muses¹⁶ of the arts in Greek mythology:

- memory (Mnēmē): "to join past and present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago";
- poetry (Aoidē): "to conceive of whatever it chooses by the help of the imagination"; and
- practice/thought (Meletē): "its ingenuity in the invention of such admirable arts."

All of this, Calvin concludes, is the divinity of man. Which is precisely the case I am making here, even if we make the case to different ends: for Calvin, the divinity of man lies in the soul's glorification of God and the mortification of the body; for me, the divinity of man is the overcoming of our belittled condition through the ever greater reachings of our

imagination toward a coherent knowledge of the world. As Roberto Unger says, we can only hope for divinity in ourselves by embracing the *inescapability* of the three flaws in our human condition.

Calvin's doctrines and politics stem from his position as one of the founders of humanism. He believed strongly in the rights of individuals, in the separation of the church and the state, in democratic institutions, and in the value of hard work. His religious writing greatly influenced the rise of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Capitalism then wasn't the same as the contemporary form of global neoliberalism that usurps power from the state and the individual.

We lost the world when our insatiability was divorced from our sacredness, allowing greed to be the engine of imagination rather than uniting our insatiability with a desire for the perpetuation of the world and ourselves. Such a unification would know the preciousness of the world even after our mortal flesh is gone. I think Calvin himself did, even if many of his followers do not.

What I aim to show here—through Calvin's definition of the soul—is that all notions of the sacred—religious and secular—try in some way to deal with the inescapability of our human flaws. Because of this struggle, the arts have always been a fundamental human endeavour.

14. Cited by Marilynne Robinson in *When I Was a Child I Read Books*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 2012, 148. The source of this English translation is unclear and may be the author's own translation, therefore I provide the original French as well.
15. Jean Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne*, an 1888 revision to the 1560 French edition, 26. Accessed via the Open Library online.
16. For more about the three Muses, read my 2012 essay titled "Whither the Imagination: Making Sense of Art."

Construing the World Through Poetic Attention

Calvin's definition of the soul begins with its "manifold agility...to take a survey of heaven and earth." This surveying of *what is* is poetic attention—which I wish to consider a little more closely in relation to imagination's double act: perception and construal.

Poetic attention to the unsayable—that which is perceived but not yet articulated, and therefore not yet known—is the first act of imagination. The second act is the creation of a relation between the unsayable and what is already known—what has already been said—in order to bring the unsayable unknown into the said and known. The two things then stand in relation to each other, defining each others' condition and presence as knowledge; they become metaphor and therefore, they have meaning.

Don McKay refers to the reciprocity of two things in relation as the "condition of betweenness"¹⁷—the vast black space between the stars. The limitation of metaphor, in all its poetic and functional beauty, is that it never fully gets at the truth; the two things in relation are never fully their counterpart but a mere suggestion of it. Mathematics as a representation of the physical universe will never be the same as the universe itself nor will it ever propose a perfect model of it; mathematics are metaphors adopted from primal forms of human cognition shaped by millennia of perceiving the physical features of

the natural world—a survey of heaven and earth.¹⁸ However, the immense power of metaphor is its ability to continually generate something novel, hence the name given to long works of fiction—novels.

Marilynne Robinson, a novelist and essayist, says this about unsayability:

I continuously attempt to make inroads on the vast terrain of what cannot be said—or said by me, at least. I seem to know by intuition a great deal that I cannot find words for, and to enlarge the field of my intuition every time I fail again to find these words. That is to say, the unnamed is overwhelmingly present and real for me.¹⁹

Her poetic attention is attuned to the unsayable and that informs her artistic inquiry. She intuits the world and then puts those intuitions into words. Or, for other artists, into form, movement, sound, and so on.

What Robinson reveals is deeply personal. She presents to the world *her* intuitions of the unsayable because that is akin to showing the world one's deepest self, the sacred. This is what artists do. Music and literature open up places within us for contemplation—places that originate new meaning. The *not-knowing* that is prior to listening and reading becomes a silent, inchoate *knowing*—it is coherence. "When the knowing and the not-knowing meet, it is an event that seems to make existence whole again."²⁰

Intuitions of the unsayable, informed by perception of what is known, take shape within our soul,

17. Don McKay, *The Speaker's Chair: Field Notes on Betweenness—The 2010 Pratt Lecture*. St. John's NL: Running the Goat Press, 2010, n.p.
18. For the best analysis of mathematics as a metaphor, read George Lakoff and Raphael Núñez's *Where Mathematics Comes From: How the Embodied Mind Brings Mathematics into Being*, 2000. Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin, in their respective fields of pragmatist philosophy and theoretical physics, further argue for the impossibility of definitively modelling the laws of nature and that our best hope for god-like perception is through continual reaching for new metaphoric relations. Many analytic philosophers eschew this on the grounds that knowledge and logic require certainty—something metaphor can never promise.
19. Robinson, 20.
20. Philip Davis, 7

our embodied self. We are conscious that there is something just outside our grasp, and— driven by our insatiable desire to know everything, by our desperate pursuit for any hopeful form of immortality, and by our yearning for a resolution to the ‘why’ of it all—we find ourselves digging deep into the storehouses of our selves to emerge with barrels of imaginative expression and bushels of new metaphors: this is the bounty of our sacredness.

Our Embodied Self as the Site of Meaning: A Social, Emotional, and Visceral Act

Metaphors exist in space and time, defined by sociality. It takes two to make a metaphor. For a metaphor to have meaning, two individuals must have at least a rudimentary knowledge of the two things put in relation. To hear Bringham’s reference to the ‘thoughts of the gods’ one understands more deeply the nature of the gods because one has knowledge of the power and ephemerality of thoughts. And one learns more about the generative potential of thoughts because of one’s knowledge of gods. So, to stand in relation is to be known more deeply. This is how all of language and meaning is formed; it is a social, imaginative act that we all contribute to during lucid hours and in dreams. In metaphor, our insatiable appetite for producing meaning corresponds to our desire—in the deepest part of our sacred being—to be social.

This, then, brings us to the question: by what means do we know that we stand in resonant relation to

others? If we shape the world through metaphor, what cues do we receive from ourselves and others that the metaphors resonate, that the meaning is received or rebuffed? How do we sense when the unsayable becomes sayable, or when the sayable becomes unsayable? I often refer to Jan Zwicky’s definition of metaphor as ‘seeing-as’ so I was intrigued to discover Adam Morton’s definition of emotion as ‘seeing-as’ in his recent book *Emotion and Imagination* (Polity Press, 2013).

The word ‘emotion’ comes from the Latin *ēmovēre* (the French *émouvoir*), from the root ‘motion’, meaning to move from one state or place to another. We say that an emotion ‘moves’ us. What we are literally saying is that the emotion, evoked by a metaphor (an experience), moved our knowledge of something from one state to another. When we hear or see the putting of two things in relation through metaphor, we conjure meaning based on how we feel about it. Our emotions are the interplay between our personality and our sociality—between our internal thoughts that are wholly inaccessible to the world and the externally-dependent, world-shaping ‘thoughts of the gods’. To experience an emotion is to find meaning somewhere in between that which we know in our embodied spirit (our soul) and that which we know of the world. There is an immense potential in the unsayable that we know emotionally—as Morton puts it, “Perhaps emotion made thought possible.”²¹

Marilynne Robinson defines the work of the writer as saying the unsayable; it is the profundity of fiction. Matthew Stadler, in his first novel,

21. Adam Morton, *Emotion and Imagination*, Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2013, 21.

Landscape: Memory, offers an insight into emotions and meaning-making. The narrator writes in his ‘memory book’ an account of a dream he had, evoking imagery from letters his uncle has been sending home from the Front:

18 December 1915

I'm on a war train through Belgium, leaving the front and going back into Germany. We left Liège in the dead of night and crossed the frontier at Lüttich, bound for Köln with freight loads of dismembered soldiers and corpses. Their moaning is a song, long and low with harmony and counterpoint but no rhythm or meter I can hear. I understand precisely the meaning of their song. There are no words. It sweeps through me in waves of agreement or empathy and then distance. Closeness then distance, a drawing toward then away, being what meaning feels like without words.

Words have been blown out of me at the front, that is my injury. I haven't any words to speak with or hold thoughts in. I feel sounds directly, with nothing in between. I sit with my back up against the thin rattling wall of the freight car, the soldiers singing around me.²²

And later:

My crying was a way my body had of freeing me from the burden of speech.²³

A trauma so unimaginable as to wither the imagination, he feels meaning not through description but directly, viscerally. *Closeness, then distance, drawing toward, then away*, is the movement of emotions so intense that they short-circuit language and resonate meaning

directly. Speech—a burden—dissipates and loses its monopoly on meaning. Thought, too, is dispatched; metaphor has no resonance; there is no ‘betweenity’ in the sad songs of the dying; it is in resonant relation to nothing. It has meaning that remains unsayable, impossible ever to be seen-as something else. So visceral is the moaning. So powerful is literature that it can make sayable even that which can never be wholly sayable. Only experience can transcend description and metaphor; it is in our physical selves that we embody such meaning, literally as vibrations resonating meaning—the soldiers’ moaning and the rattling wall of the freight car.

Clowns: the Sad, Silent Embodiment of Humanity

The condition of sadness is our *lacrimae rerum*, our pathetic and inescapable lot in life. Only more pathetic are sad, silent clowns, the foil against which mortal humans hold themselves in laughing jest and stark terror. Clowns are silent, sad survivors who observe the carnage of life. They are improvising circus entertainers, who are even more impoverished than the impoverished masses that mock and ridicule them.

Clowns mime the origin of us. Clowns are primal versions of our selves as infants entering a paradoxical world in which we are both completely ignorant and innately aware of our flawed human condition; for pre-linguistic infants, all things are

22. Matthew Stadler, *Landscape: Memory*, New York: Scribner's, 1990, 284-285.

23. *Ibid*, 291.

unsayable. So, clowns are metaphors: never fully one thing or another, and only meaningful when put in relation to humanity. We see the unsayability of ourselves in clowns. Our passions and personalities are exposed in pantomimed emotion.

At the Clown Farm on Manitoulin Island (created by John Turner—Mump in the infamous show, *Mump and Smoot*), the beginners' workshop on "Mask and Clown" is called *Baby Clown*.²⁴ At the conclusion of the workshop, a birthday party is organized to introduce the new baby clowns to the world. Each red-nosed clown takes its first wobbly step and comes face to face with the realization of a silent, inchoate knowing that exists in a world without language. A clown is a being without language and meaning, set apart, yet with a sacred right to 'say' anything. They *show* us meaning and reveal to us language; yet the clown as metaphor exists between meaning and incoherence, never fully one nor the other. Terrifying—and magical.

In North America, clowning is indigenous. It is a tradition handed down from Native societies over centuries, with the clowns existing alongside shamans, medicine men, and priests. It was Richard Pochinko (a student of the Native clown, Jonsmith) who recognized the value of bringing Native clowning to the rest of contemporary society. In a new book on the subject, the authors Veronica Coburn and Sue Morrison, keen students of Pochinko's, articulate the purpose of the Native clown:

...to tell his/her shameful secret. To overcome his/her pride and dignity so that s/he can lay

bare his/her humanity with humility and joy to ensure the equitable survival of the group.²⁵

John Turner's Clown Farm carries on this tradition of birthing sacred clowns to show us ourselves and to show us possibilities for resilience despite the flaws of our condition. Clowns are survivors who help us survive.

That they must be sacrificed for our salvation is the inescapable plight of clowns. They lay down their dignity and expose their shame so that we can laugh and find joy in the world. Clowns are sad so we can have reprieve. Clowns despair. They embody the futility of hope. Mrss Design's film, *Standing Ovation*, is a tragic illustration of this paradoxical fate (featuring Anton Perez as the clown, directed by Stefan Gellert).

There is a direct correlation between the emotions of remorse and despair, according to Adam Morton in *Emotion and Imagination*. Remorse is the emotional expression of our regret that we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of our existence or that of the world; it is our desperate response to our inescapable groundlessness. Despair is the loss of hope. But as Morton explains, the complement to despair is absurdity—the comic realization that humanity's striving to overcome its mortality, its insatiability, and its groundlessness is so absurd that we can only make sense of it by laughing at it. He writes, "It is a reason for despair that there cannot be a noble story acted by clowns such as us."²⁶ The opening frame of Mrss Design's film proffers a subtle clue that the suicidal clown is to be both pitied and laughed at: a poster advertises the clown's show with

24. Officially called the Manitoulin Conservatory for Creation and Performance. <http://www.theclownfarm.com/>

25. Veronica Coburn and Sue Morrison, *Clown Through Mask*, Chicago: Intellect, 2013.

26. Morton, 196.

the title “Life is Beautiful”—an allusion to the title of Roberto Benigni’s *Life is Beautiful*, a 1997 film about a Jewish man who must use his humour to not only survive the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp but to find moments of beauty in it.

The Fit of Human Thought to the World

Our world is plural, consisting of multiple stories, many of which aren’t told in the commodified environments we have constructed in much of our urban design—shopping malls, suburban sprawl, big-box developments, and incoherent spaces for consumption. Rather the compelling stories of our sacredness are told artistically through continual reaching of the imagination and through careful contemplation of the natural world. They are stories of bear-women in the Greek forest of Arcadia and in the coulees of Saskatchewan prairies. They are stories of indigeneity and ingenuity. Our earliest metaphors—which gave form to language, to meaning—were shaped over millennia of evolution through observation of the physical, natural world around us. (Things fall, heat rises, solids contain, fluids flow, and so on.) And its on the roots of these metaphors that human evolution continues to expand. As Canadian poet Don McKay wrote, “It is as dangerous to act as though we were not a part of nature as it is to act as though we were not a part of culture.”²⁷

The thoughts of the gods that Bringhurst evokes in *Ursa Major* aren’t the thoughts of supernatural beings. These thoughts are the imaginative reaching of the human spirit revealing possibilities for our own divinity by embracing of the inescapable flaws of our condition. That embrace is collective; it is metaphor and meaning. It is the embodied experience of the unsayable made sayable through the faculties of the vast imaginations of our fellow beings. It is our way of reconciling nature and culture, of giving stars the names of Arcturus and Arctos in the sacred arcade of the sky. It is our way of telling in great literary texts the stories of humanity’s struggles with the absurdity, the beauty, and the tragedy of our existence, stories told with the despondency of the prophet Job who pleaded in desperation with God to intervene: “Canst thou guide Arcturus and his sons?”²⁸

It is what Jan Zwicky writes, and what will be the topic of Part 3 in this series on sacredness: “Coming to experience the fit of human thought to the world is a way of finding ourselves at home.”²⁹

27. Don McKay, *Vis à Vis: Field Notes on Poetry & Wilderness*, Wolfville: Gaspereau Press, 2001.
28. *The Bible*, Job 38:32, King James Version.
29. Jan Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Wolfville: Gaspereau Press, 2003, L27.