

May 25, 2011

Dear Gerdien,

Thank you for your letter, your questions, and your patience. My only excuse for a late reply is the fact that you are asking the most difficult and perhaps the most important questions. I am not able to provide any adequate answers to them. But since you press me, I will comment briefly upon them and tell you how I think we might be able to deal with them.

My main comment is very simple: We should spend a much more time on reflecting on the strange beings which we are ourselves and which we develop in our relationship with all other beings and reality itself. I shall share with you some thoughts that I am trying to make clear to myself concerning this matter. I will proceed in light of the questions in your letter from June 21, 2010.

You write:

*In your book *Meditation at the edge of Askja*, you underline the importance of being an 'earthling'. Could you describe/explain to us what an earthling is, and why it is so important to feel one's identity as an earthling?*

*As almost half of the world's population lives in urban areas, totally disconnected from nature or the natural environment, (children assuming that vegetables or milk are solely produced in factories), how can we re-establish our connection with the earth?*

*But then, if we would suggest that living close to nature and knowing the deep interconnectedness with it, will make us act more responsibly towards it, how is it possible that Icelanders of all people, got so involved in these tricky financial dealings, so lost in greed?*

We are human beings. What does that mean? I believe that one important way to interpret this fact is to see us as inhabitants of the earth, i.e. as earthlings. To be an earthling is to feel one's life to be bound to the earth, or deriving from it, to feel the earth to be the fundamental premise of one's life. We stand on the earth – build, work, and destroy it, if it comes to that – because we are born to the earth and can only find ourselves in relation to it, in the light of it or in its embrace. The earth is thus the beginning and end of all of our feeling for reality as a unified totality, and thus of all of our feeling for ourselves as inhabitants of the world. We share this fact with a great number of other living beings. One of the differences between us and other living beings is that we are conscious of ourselves, and as conscious beings we are always developing and experiencing our

relationship with the earth as part of an infinite cosmic order. You describe this well in your letter to me, and your photos are expressions of the relationships you are experiencing with reality as a unique conscious being, as you travel in Iceland or elsewhere.

Because we are aware of being aware – here and now in this disappearing moment – of ourselves in connexion with all encompassing and infinite reality (which we commonly call “Nature”) we need a spiritual bond to stabilize our relationship. All religions bear witness to this effort of ours. Science and art are, of course, born out of the same effort. These intellectual activities have only one end: to help us connect with reality *as* a reality to which we can relate in stable ways, and thus to recognize our earthly condition, our identity *as earthlings*. (An illustration of this recognition is the old Christian belief that our eventual future home is either up in Heaven or down in Hell. The Icelandic volcano, Hekla, was considered to be one of the main entrances to Hell.)

On the other hand our human civilisation – in all its variety – is a constant struggle to create an environment where we can protect ourselves against the forces of Nature that are everywhere at work. Modern cities, with all of their technological equipment, may seem to be able to isolate our human reality from the reality of Nature and thus to secure a great estrangement from our earthly condition. But that is, of course, an illusion. Our cities are always part of a given landscape; they always reveal our ways of relating to our earthly condition within specific natural conditions.

Changing weather conditions, the sun, the wind, the rain, constantly remind us, even in urban areas, of the fact that we and all our constructions depend upon the forces of Nature which are at work in the earthly reality to which we belong. And in many places earthquakes and volcanic eruptions awaken us again and again to the fragility of our technological constructions.

The fact of being more exposed to the forces of Nature, as Icelanders are, does not mean that one develops a deeper respect or more profound awareness of natural reality. On the contrary, living in constant awareness of the dangerous forces of Nature may lead one to dream of inventing ever more effective technological means in order to defy or to control the forces of Nature. And since money is a means to increase our technological power – for example to build bigger electrical power plants in order to increase production of material goods – financial globalisation offered the Icelanders an opportunity to engage in speculation that lead them, as many other nations, into a disastrous social and political situation. – Here we come to your second question.

*The economic crisis shows itself as a crisis of morality, integrity and confidence. But as Iceland' small, yet close society is already struggling to come to terms with the seismic effects of this crisis, how can we rebuild trust and confidence internationally, as we do not know each other in the global village? Is this recession only a dark & gloomy night or is there also light in it?*

I think you are quite right to see the present crisis as a crisis of morality, integrity and confidence. People in each country feel or live this crisis in different ways because of the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. In Iceland we are still a long way from recovering from

the traumatic effects of the crash of the banks. Most of the people who were directly involved in the development of the society before the crash still deny their responsibility for what happened. Nevertheless, the Parliament set up an Investigation committee that wrote an extensive report in 8 volumes explaining the failures, mistakes, and the corruption that led to the crash (see a résumé in English <http://sic.althingi.is/>). Unfortunately, the whole Report has not yet been translated into English as should be done, because it is most informative about things that happened not only in Iceland, but also elsewhere in the world.

This Report provides a lot of information that is needed in order to understand why and how a crisis like the one we are going through happens. But information is not enough. We need much more extensive and deeper knowledge of human nature, our societies, our cultures, and morality in order to deal with the problems we are facing.

You ask how we can rebuild trust and confidence internationally, as we do not know each other in the global village. Here I think you point to a most important issue, that we still have not dealt with properly, namely the issue of knowledge. Knowledge is one of the strangest phenomena on earth. It is because we are beings who exist through developing ideas, beliefs and theories, that we are able to discover the mysterious aspects of nature and to realize how little we really understand its forces and changes. Knowledge is our natural human way of relating to reality and to ourselves. But what does that mean? What does it mean to know nature? What does it mean to know each other? What does mean to know oneself?

I am not sure we have ever taken these questions very seriously in our educational systems. And I am afraid that our knowledge both of Nature and of our man-made environment is very limited. Science and technology have developed for a far too long time, I believe, without being properly connected to the area of knowledge which is the most important: *the Ethical dimension*.

That is what I am trying to draw attention to in my *Mediation at the Edge of Askja*. The discovery of Reality, of Nature, of Truth, of Beauty, and so on is an *ethical event* because this discovery determines how we develop our relationships to ourselves, to others, and to all beings, living and lifeless, with whom we share the world. We do not know of any other sort of living being who has this awareness of discovering the world as we do. And this gives us a responsibility we have yet to assume. As Mankind – with its enormous ethical, theoretical, and technological potentialities – we are still in our infancy.

Knowledge of the Reality to which we belong is what makes us into ethical beings. It provides the objective perspective that makes it possible for us to transcend all our personal interests and to understand to a certain extent the interests of all other beings in the world. It opens our minds to the indescribable powers of Nature that transcend all our thought making us into nothing in comparison with its magnitude.

The fact is that we have become so fascinated by our own theoretical and technological inventions that we have not paid proper attention to the revelation of Reality itself that we are witnessing. The spiritual and intellectual bond we need to develop with nature in order to make sense of our life has thus been neglected. The nihilism that characterizes our present civilisation is a natural outcome of this negligence.

The lack of trust, integrity, and confidence are the side effects of this nihilism. They reveal our profound ignorance of ourselves and how we are connecting to natural reality, to social reality, and to the reality of our own thinking. To develop oneself as an ethical being is to learn to trust oneself, other people, and ultimately, to show the powers of Nature the respect they deserve because without them we would not exist and be aware of ourselves. Nature is the origin, and the ultimate object, of our awareness.

As I write these words, Grimsvötn, the big volcano in the middle of Vatnajökull in Iceland, has erupted making flying over the North Atlantic once again very risky. Perhaps we still need much harder lessons from Nature before we start to rearrange our human affairs in quite different ways than we have been doing so far, both on national and international levels. Then we might develop progressively the ethical knowledge needed to make proper use of our theoretical and technological inventions.

*Returning to the question: 'What in life is most precious to you?' When we live up to our answer, we achieve integrity: integrating words and actions. Being whole. Being trustworthy. It seems to me that there is a great yearning for integrity on a personal level as well as in society. Why is it so difficult sometimes, to live up to our answers? How can we recognize our greed and transform it into a sustainable way of living?*

This reflection of yours leads us directly into thinking about the kind of ethical knowledge that we need in order to deal properly with our life-problems and to organize our life-projects.

Let us start by looking at the second question: How can we recognize our greed and transform it into a sustainable way of living? As a matter of fact, we have already accumulated a lot of knowledge about ourselves, our natural developments, our characteristics compared to other animals, our history, and our diversified economic, cultural, social, and political activities. But I think we still have to learn to make a proper use of this knowledge in order to deal properly with our life-problems and the critical issues we are facing in our present situation. How can we learn that?

Perhaps we can learn it by adopting the perspective of an "earthling" as I have tried to explain it. From that perspective all creatures -both as species and as individuals compete in nature to sustain themselves and improve their relative position, which one might recognize as a kind of natural "greed". We also learn from nature that when the species and individuals are seized by unlimited

greed they ultimately destroy their own resources, destroy their own habitats, and deny themselves the advantages that might have been gained by symbiotic relationships.

As self-conscious earthlings, we have the capacity to reflect upon this and shape our values and our behaviors accordingly; this is not possible for other species. An exaggerated individualism and materialism blind people to the necessity -even from the point of view of their own advantage -of preserving human resources and habitats, which include language, learning, art, religion, social harmony, law and justice and the institutions that cultivate them, and to the necessity of what might be called "social symbiosis" within families, nations and societies. Exaggerated, "blinding greed", in other words, undermines and defeats the aims of "natural greed".

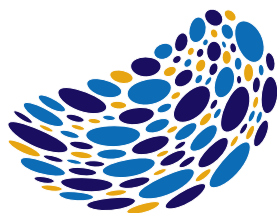
Natural greed might be understood as greed within the limits of morality, compatible with sympathy, cooperation and altruism, while blinding greed might be understood as greed that does not respond to morality. Our present culture, although it gives lip service to law and morality in fact cultivates blinding greed. But culture can be shaped, or re-shaped, through reflection -among other things, reflection upon our status as members of a natural, earthling community -and we can therefore in principle be brought to reject blinding greed in favor of natural greed.

Sympathy, kindness, fraternity and altruism are all integral to natural greed, and are antithetical only to blinding greed. So, in answering your question in the terms that you ask it, I would say that our progress and welfare lies not in the utopian hope of remaking the human animal as a creature free from greed, but in coming to understand greed in a different way -as a natural drive, essentially constructive and subject to natural limits, and friendly to cooperation, sympathy, altruism and -in a word -morality.

As regards the first question, it might be said that it is difficult to live up to our own answers when they are in fact not convincing answers within our cultures and therefore not fully convincing even to ourselves. The obstacles are moral blindness sustained by ignorance, prejudice and the refusal to determine our way of living through critical discourse and dialogue.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Paul Sunilason". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.



PAAUW

The Netherlands, Tilburg, 21 June 2010

University of Iceland  
Department of Philosophy  
Professor Páll Skúlason  
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101 Reykjavík  
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Dear professor Skúlason,

Thank you for our pleasant conversation on the phone the other week and your willingness to consider my request to contribute as a big thinker to my project *'Day for Night – a photographic quest for a sustainable economic future.'* As I told you I have been deeply inspired by your book *'Meditation at the edge of Askja'*, as well as by an interview you gave to the Dutch broadcasting company VPRO, concerning the economic crisis in the autumn of 2009.

For *'Day for Night'* I travelled to Iceland for 2 months in the summer 2009 and in January 2010. I photographed the impressive landscapes during the bright summer nights and short winter days. I also portrayed and interviewed 38 Icelandic people from all walks of life, on how their lives had been affected by this crisis. For me, there is no country like Iceland. I love it. Its not only the subject of this project as such, but also a powerful symbol of Earth itself. So maybe the solutions for this economic crisis may also be found 'there'.

My photography project has finished, but I would like to give the project a broader perspective and deeper meaning. I believe that we can solve this crisis only if we exchange the expertise and wisdom from as many backgrounds as possible, both professionally and internationally. I would be delighted, if you would share some thoughts with me about this crisis, in which our countries are so involved.

You may find all results of my project on: [www.day-for-night.com](http://www.day-for-night.com). If you are willing to contribute to the project by responding to this letter, I will publish your contribution on the website of 'Day for Night' for all visitors to read and consider, with your permission. I would like to invite you to read my experiences during my travelling in Iceland and the questions that were evoked there:

Some months before my departure, I was feeling anxious about how I would cope with travelling all by myself for 10 weeks altogether to one of the most remote countries in Europe. To get clear what exactly I was worried about, I contemplated on the concepts: solitude, isolation, loneliness, desolation. I was afraid that I might going to feel lonely when trying to find out about them. This insight was a relief, because now I could relate to them and think of solutions on what to do in case of...

I took a wide range of music with me: Madonna, Melua, Pärt, da Palestrina, to name a few. But travelling along in my small van, in these spacious landscapes I felt that no kind of music sufficed, I preferred silence. And how I learned to feel at ease with it. Driving along in total silence, the engine of the car and the winds outside as the only sounds.

This silence, stillness, seemed to intensify my way of looking at and awareness of the landscapes. Endless emptiness. Sudden sunlight as a spotlight in a theatre, lighting up the peak of a mountain. The glimpses of water, clouds at the horizon. The green grey moss, the endless lava fields 'moving' like the oceans. The colours of the landscapes by night. Pastel sunsets. Diffuse light. The waters of the fjords changing into smooth, dark depths.

I experienced a total peace of mind; I realized I was part of the earth, of its vastness, its power, indifference, its eternity. Utmost reality. Just being. Accepting life as it is. That everything has its place and meaning in time and space and that we as human beings are part of this earth, this world, this existence. That we humans matter of course, but that the earth will outlive us by far.

This was not an experience I had aimed or strived for. It happened and I let it happen. How could I resist? This earth energy also empowered me to give myself fully to this project. To meet people, talk, do interviews, wake up at night, climb mountains, wait for the light. Be spontaneous and open. Go for it. Flow.

*In your book 'Meditation at the edge of Askja', you underline the importance of being an 'earthling'. Could you describe/explain to us what an earthling is, and why it is so important to feel one's identity as an earthling?*

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My profound experience of Iceland's earth powers also brought me to the first question I asked the participants in *'Day for Night'*: 'What in life is most precious to you?' To go back to the very basics of our existence. What is it that moves us most, really matters? That inspires us, gives meaning to our lives? Makes us feel 'belonging', respected, loved, cared for, connected?

Most people answered that first of all it was their family: their safe haven, the warm nest. Living on an island, with a small number of people, almost everybody is more or less family. No need for formalities or over-politeness. The Icelandic telephone directory says it all: everybody is in it, in order of first name. Iceland being so rough and sparsely populated, the weather changing almost every hour, people know they need each other. In Iceland to live is to relate.

I could experience this connectedness, the social fabric, by the trust I sensed everywhere: my car was stuffed with equipment, clothing and food. At the beginning of my journey I always locked it carefully. But when time passed, I simply forgot locking it. I might return from a hike to discover my car was unlocked again! ... and that nothing had happened to it. This created a deep sense of trust towards the people I met and confidence in Iceland's society. To trust and to be trusted. Just to look each other in the eye, sense and decide to trust. I realized how natural this attitude actually is. How human. How relaxing. How powerful and necessary to sustain a society.

But there is of course, another side to this social net: people told me that because of the closeness of Iceland's society - 'the caring family'; it is difficult to have a different opinion, of speaking one's mind, of criticism. It is easier and more rewarding to fit in. Jobs, trades, responsibilities are often given to family members, instead of to those most qualified for it. A few mighty families control Iceland's trade, media and politics. 'We are a mafia country' someone stated boldly. That seemed an exaggeration to me. But since the Investigation Report, published 12 April 2010, by the Special Investigative Commission of the Icelandic Parliament on the causes of the collapse of the Icelandic banking system, we have learned that corruption was found in many layers and institutions of society. This betrayal by 'family members' has deeply divided Iceland's families and its society: 'To face that your former classmate has ruined your bank, savings and retirement pension, is just impossible to grasp', someone else said.

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*Is this recession only a dark & gloomy night or is there also light in it?*



Returning to the question: 'What in life is most precious to you?' When we live up to our answer, we achieve integrity: integrating words and actions. Being whole. Being trustworthy. It seems to me that there is a great yearning for integrity on a personal level as well as in society.

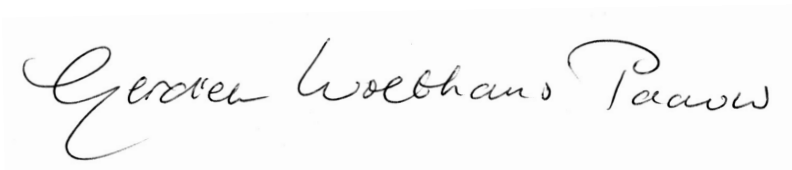
*Why is it so difficult sometimes, to live up to our answers?*

*How can we recognize our greed and transform it into a sustainable way of living?*

Dear professor Skúlason, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with me and help to create a deeper understanding of this crisis and the possibilities it might bear. I would love to exhibit 'Day for Night' in Iceland one day and be able to meet in you in person.

With best regards, með kveðju,

Gerdien Wolthaus Paauw  
Photographer

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light background, reading "Gerdien Wolthaus Paauw". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.