

LISTENING TO DEATH AND URSULA LE GUIN IN THE TRANSITION TO THE ECOZOIC

By Laurie Cone

Ursula Kroeber Le Guin died at the age of 88 at her home in Portland, Oregon on January 22, 2018. It wasn't until I read the tributes and revival of interviews following her death that I realized what a remarkable thinker and writer she was. Her insights into what has the capacity to undo and remake thriving culture may have particular relevance to those of us seeking to restore an equilibrium between our species and the rest of creation. In particular her observations in the Earthsea series about denying death its appropriate place may be of great value in transitioning our current culture away from destruction.

The primary theme of the third book of the series, *The Farthest Shore*, involves the quest of the Archmage Ged to understand why wizards everywhere are losing their magic, and why so many people seem uncaring, even as their crops fail and their animals are dying. At first the reason seems to be the lack of a king to provide order and protection, but probing deeper it becomes clear that something much more sinister is happening. The parallels with current culture were hard to overlook, as when Ged explains, "When we crave power over life, endless wealth, unassailable safety, immortality—then desire becomes greed. And if knowledge allies itself to that greed, then comes evil. Then the balance of the world is swayed and ruin weighs heavy in the scale" (Le Guin 1972, 53). In the story, this greed-become-evil has offered the promise of immortality, and enough people have desired it to throw off the functioning of the entire world. As the story concludes, Ged counsels the young king-to-be on the mistake of seeking to avoid death. "Only to us is it given to know that we must die. And that is a great gift: the gift of selfhood. For we have only what we know we must lose, what we are willing to lose. . . . Would you give up the craft of your hands, and the passion of your heart, and the light of sunrise and sunset to buy safety for yourself—safety forever?" (Le Guin 1972, 184). He later continues that in death, rather than being diminished, one becomes "earth and sunlight, the leaves of trees, the eagle's flight. All who have ever died live; they are reborn and have no end. . . . Death is the price of life, for all life" (Le Guin 1972, 271).

In Stephen Jenkinson's book *Die Wise*, he makes a similar case that only through our dying can something besides us be fed and have some chance to live. He even goes as far as saying that suffering comes from an unwillingness in this culture to recognize how "on the take" we've been, and how willing we are to "wring from the world all we desire" (Jenkinson 2015, 182).

I recently revisited my preparations for my own approaching decline and death. In addition to my power of attorney, health care power of attorney, and will, I found a very detailed, but blank, form that attempts to offer guidance to family and caregivers, should I not be able respond for myself. It asks about my preferences for medical care and interventions. The questions were challenging—especially concerning my desires about resuscitation, antibiotics, tube feeding, etc., at ten declining levels of functioning. It occurred to me that it shouldn't be this hard to have a simple natural death! What is going on in our culture that encourages us to

live as if we're not going to die for as long as possible, then to cling irrationally to prolonging a diseased debilitated state of living?

We have lost our bearings about when it's our time to die. Our culture has such an ethos of MORE that we have come to believe the only good dying is one that happens later, after we have more. I wonder how we find our way back to an undomesticated, uncolonized way of knowing, back to a way of recognizing when our particular turn for having this incredible experience of being in a sensing body in this unbelievably beautiful world is over. Surely this is linked to knowing how to recognize the beingness of all that is around us. As Ecozoans, we're often clear about the beauty and wonder of being incarnated, but we are less interested in recognition of and participation in the full cycle (which allows incarnation!) that, of course, includes death.

In the moments when I can experience my death as my true companion, my relationships and the world around me reach a vibrancy that is palpable. I can't believe how fortunate I've been to know these incredible people; I can't believe how much I have received from Earth; and my heart cracks open at the poignancy of leaving. I then understand more fully Jenkinson's encouragement in *Die Wise* (2015, 182, 186), to let our way of dying "recognize the extravagant debt that we have piled up by living as we have [and not try to] banish what is hard and demanding about dying."

Can we learn to bravely recognize the end? Enormous amounts of money are spent in the last months of life, often in hopes of getting back to a state of health that will never return. What if removing the medical technology made those last months become last weeks or days instead? What if they were spent expressing love and gratitude, asking and offering forgiveness, and using the remaining life energy to watch and wonder at the mysterious process that is unfolding? Like birth doulas who encourage mothers to trust that their bodies know how to birth a child, could we offer each other encouragement to trust that our bodies know how to slowly let go of our mastery and control and let this singular opportunity to give back to the Earth unfold?

In the final book of the Earthsea series, *The Other Wind*, the now depleted Ged reflects that humans are the distinctive species that can tell stories, and can tell lies. And they are the only species that over and over must choose to do good or do evil (Le Guin 2001, 52-53). The closing of the book could be simplified as the coming together of diverse people working at great personal risk to tear down a wall that blocked the natural transition of the dead to whatever is beyond death. All were from groups which had previously competed and denigrated each other, and each admitted his or her part in nearly bringing about the end of a functioning world.

Courageously facing our own and our loved ones' dying will deepen our capacity for bearing other kinds of suffering as well. We may then be able to see more clearly what needs to be done, or not to be done, to help ourselves and our communities shift to more truly life-giving ways of being. Back in Earthsea, as the Mage Seppel observes during the unsettled time before

resolution seemed possible, “But we’re all walking in the night, now, on ground we don’t know. When the day comes we may know where we are, or we may not” (Le Guin 2001, 169).

References:

Jenkinson, Stephen. 2015. *Die Wise*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Press.

Le Guin, Ursula. 1972. *The Farthest Shore*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

_____ 2001. *The Other Wind*. New York: Harcourt.