

A Wonderful World

[Louis Armstrong - What A Wonderful World \(Original Spoken Intro Version\)](#)

Volker Brendel: Welcome everyone to this wonderful world! I very much appreciate that old favorite song, first performed many decades ago. On first impression, the song might seem to convey a very simple, maybe naïve message. But as we lift our eyes, we must agree that this is a wonderful world. This recognition is particularly easy in the springtime if you are in a nice setting; birds are singing, flowers are bursting forth, life is in full evidence.

But I also appreciate the narrative at the beginning of the song which is anything but naïve. It addresses the apparent dichotomy between our occasional perception of the world as wonderful and the undeniable misery as well, which is just as easy to observe. The narrative points to a very simple resolution of this apparent dichotomy: What about us? What about our responsibility? The way it is put in the narrative: Let us give the world a chance to be wonderful!

One of my philosophies to live by is to try in every situation to make it a little bit more beautiful than when I came into it. This is a very simple principle, and very powerful and useful in teaching as well, for example as a parent. Let's say you visit a place, maybe family. Can you behave in such a way that everyone feels a little bit better when you leave? Or, let's say you go on a hike in nature and you come upon a piece of litter—maybe pick up just one piece and leave the hiking path a little bit nicer. And so it goes in any situation anywhere. What about a focus on giving, on making a contribution? Even in situations when you are apparently there to take something. For example, you patronize a business, maybe a hotel or a grocery store, or whatever. I have found that in many such situations, a kind word here, a generous tip there, a smile—and lo and behold, the people serving you (the customer) get a boost of energy and feel appreciated. This is a simple illustration and practice of what our rightful role is in the world.

In the current situation almost anywhere for almost everyone, it is quite natural to put ones focus very localized. Maybe initially, the focus is on how I am doing. Obviously, this has to do with our physical well-being in the face of the all-pervasive pandemic. We may probe our feelings to see how are we doing. And if all is well, hopefully, we extend our view a little bit beyond. How is our family doing? How is our community doing, maybe our place of work or our county? And thus, we have the capacity for a concentrically larger view. Going as far as our state, or maybe our nation, and some people take that yet another step and think globally.

We have had 50 years of Earth Day this week. I think somewhere in that movement the following slogan arose and became popular: “Think globally and act locally.” So, there is some recognition that we live in a large context and that there is a connection between what is occurring seemingly far away and what is happening locally. Can we have that perspective merged with the attitude of giving?

I was reminded this morning of a Zen parable, several versions of which have been told in different cultures. It is a parable about the difference between heaven and hell. One version depicts eating with chopsticks. In both heaven and hell, the scene is similar: people sitting around a table with a delicious dish in the serving pot in the center. A scene you might still find at home, or a few weeks ago in an Asian restaurant. But there is a difference. The chopsticks are three feet long [It has been pointed out since that the chopsticks might be closer to six feet these days!]. The rules in both places are that you must manage properly with these chopsticks, i.e. hold them at one end and pick up the food at the other end. So, what’s the difference between heaven and hell? In hell, everyone tries to work with these long chopsticks to feed themselves (a very difficult task!). In heaven, people feed each other. And that is the difference between heaven and hell.

The usual human attitude is not necessarily centered on giving but on getting; what’s in it for me? Maybe for us, for my family, for my community, my nation; my nation first. Whatever small context we subscribe to, take care of that first, in a competitive world. Then we are encouraged to think globally, which usually is interpreted as the global human community. But that is not enough. We must care about the entire ecosystems, which include animal and plant communities and the rocks and soil that make up our environment.

Pollution, for example, as mentioned in the narrative to the lovely song at the beginning of the hour, has been discussed for a long time. We have taken some steps forward, some steps sideways, and some steps backward. But we are still exploiting the planet in all kinds of ways just for the perceived benefit of human beings. Helpful in the short term, maybe; but in the long term, we are reaping the rewards for the limitations of shortsightedness and the ego-centered view. Continuing to act as we have in the last 50 years in particular is completely unsustainable. Planet Earth is showing us the limits.

Now a question to raise is why is it that human beings have such a short view, thinking always and almost exclusively about themselves, thinking in very self-centered ways? Why is it this way when evidence is all around us that Life is cooperative. I think we must lift our eyes up a little bit further still. This planet has been referred to as a privileged planet. However we want to phrase this, there is recognition that our planet is situated in a very special place in the

universe. It has just the right distance from the sun; just the right combination of substances; its axis is tilted just the right degree on the planet's orbit around the sun, giving us seasons. The rotation is just right, giving us day and night cycles. On it goes. Everything is just meticulously right. Astronomers are aware that the universe is vast, and we are in but a tiny corner of it. But everywhere else they have looked they have not found anything similar. Now, maybe, and possibly likely, this is because of the limitations of our technology in terms of how far we can see into the universe. But even with a minimum sense of appreciation, we get the feeling that this is a very precious place.

Our habituated tendency to take, to exploit, and then move to the next frontier and do it all over again, assuming there is limitless abundance. That approach is coming to an end on earth. So, we get the idea that maybe we can mine an asteroid for more minerals, or maybe we can build a powerful enough spacecraft to eventually colonize some other planet. But this is pretty far-fetched; nice science fiction stuff, but not going to happen in our lifetime, nor in the experience of those who are currently children. Thus, there is a dramatic need for a shift in identity and behavior, now.

Our friend Alan Hammond published his essays under the title "Our Divine and Cosmic Identity." There is much contained in these few words (let alone in the essays!). There is the divine aspect of our identity. We did not create ourselves. We live in a wonderful world. There is an intelligence that is far beyond us that is running all that. And yet, we are an integral part of all this, and we do have that divine aspect of our identity. If it weren't so, or if we do not recognize this, then it might seem natural to have an attitude that allows us to do whatever we want to do. But if we look up, and if we look within, this is not what our identity is about. We recognize this in the beautiful flowers and birds and in the beauty within us. And if we acknowledge the second part of our identity, the cosmic aspect, then we recognize that we are connected to something larger than even this world.

How about encouraging us to think and identify cosmically and then to act globally and locally? What a large vision that would be. But, frankly, isn't that natural to us, what we feel in our quiet times and meditations, what we love to express? Why are we moved by beauty, a song, by an act of kindness? It is because this is in essence and character who we are.

Here is another, slightly silly metaphor. With respect to the spinning of the earth, I was reminded of a toy some children find fascinating. It is a rock tumbler, a little drum that can be made to rotate at moderate speed with an electric motor. The purpose is to fill the drum with rough rocks, and after days of tumbling in the rotating drum and bumping into each other, the rocks come up polished and perfectly smooth. So, maybe the gods decided to spin the earth

around a bit so that the roughly cut human beings have a chance to refine! How about that as an interpretation of some of our experiences of life: that every situation is in part an opportunity to shed some rough edges and to refine our recognition of our divine identity, a chance to refine our expression and make meaningful contributions in these situations? We remember who we are, and we knowingly express our finest, moment by moment. Is there actually anything else to do? Think of it. Even if we were the most engaged and creative earth activist, making great contributions towards a healthy planet on our record, in each moment it is still our interactions with our fellow human beings, fellow species, and our habitat that counts. And in each of those moments, we must think globally and act locally. And I say, to really have this experience consistently and confidently, we must touch yet deeper levels of our identity. It is the recognition of who we are, that Life is one, and that therefore we cannot help but think on a very large scale.

It is actually a very simple life. The current changed circumstances in the world have brought up for many people a review of their lifestyle. This may or may not apply to you, but there are certainly people in the western world who find themselves thinking about what they need. We have nutritionists to help us eat right; personal coaches to make up exercise plans for us; financial advisors to help us save and multiply our monetary assets; tax attorneys to make sure we don't give away too much; beauticians; therapists; doctors; entertainers to help us forget our real life troubles; you name it! A whole team of experts to help us live.

Maybe one outcome of these strange times will be to help us simplify our lives. It should not be so difficult to make our local contributions to the whole, coming from a deep cosmic source. We might say, the Good Lord has provided everything. Isn't that an amazing insight? Everything we need to act creatively in this moment is provided.

There is no denying of individual hardship nor of collective misery (and more to come), yet in every moment, we'll find the creative angle to contribute—which changes our experience to living in heaven rather than hell. A choice to be made. Those who have this understanding form a large community of creative beings on earth. We contribute wherever we are, points of light radiating forth in a wonderful world.

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