

A Letter to Number 400

Michael P. Nelson

Dear Number 400,

Welcome to the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, welcome to your writer's residency. You have been given an amazing gift. A gift where you reciprocate simply by enjoying your time, thinking great things, being creative, smelling the duff, damning tomorrow, wandering, sucking in air that will certainly extend your life, and living in the moment.

I can not help but wonder what things are like in 2203, or what has happened in the meantime. If you are reading this then things must have changed. Given the way things are in 2006 – where greed and corruption, violence and selfishness, disconnection from nature and one another are the default; a whole planet wired for destruction; a world quickly running out of its major energy source; a world just about to begin to face the consequences of a breath-taking period of global warming brought about by our own actions, actions and warming that we still deny – things must have changed dramatically. My hope is that they did not change only after war, and cataclysm, and great suffering. But my secret fear is that they did: that you are one of the survivors of sobering misery. But maybe there was a great awakening. Maybe the default changed. It must have, or I'm not sure you would be here.

What is the world like in 2203? Is there still a United States? Maybe we joined Canada. Maybe we finally realized that, even though they talk a little funny, they are really a lot like us; though in 2006 neither of us thinks so, eh. Maybe this one great country or region is called Turtle Island. Finally, Turtle Island, I love to think that's the case. Maybe there are no countries.

I wonder who you read, I wonder what your family does on weekends, I wonder if in your world the children of poets have health care, I wonder what your music is like, what your rituals look like, what stories you tell, what things make you cry, what you think about dying, what holidays you celebrate, how you move from place to place, what your scientists study, what you think of the past, the embarrassing past.

Are you angry? Angry with us? Will the things that you write while you are here be full of venom, or maybe pity? Or maybe I am being overly self-indulgent, maybe you simply see us as quaint, misguided, naïve. Maybe you are beyond all of that, maybe it's about celebration in 2203. I hope so.

What are your universities, your places of learning, like? What do students study? Now that they no longer churn out millions of business and finance majors, lawyers, psychologists, and various other manipulators or manipulator apologists, what do students study, what do they learn? Are there still philosophy departments? Or did we come to be seen as agents of destruction as well. Maybe we were expelled because we sat by wallowing in our own irrelevance while we possessed the tools to help, to heal, to avoid catastrophe. Maybe you eventually you caught on, and then it was hemlock cocktails all around. Fair enough.

I wonder what your religions are like. Do you still have religions? Maybe you rejected them as silly or dangerous. Maybe you all became Buddhists, or Pagans, animists of one shape or stripe. Maybe you finally decided to interpret those other religions in a more caring and loving way. Whatever happened I'm guessing that you turned toward the earth for answers instead of away from it.

Let me guess a couple of things. I am guessing that your metaphysics have changed. I am guessing that your sense of reality, of personhood, your worldview is far different from ours. I bet that you view humans as intimately connected to the more-than-human world, part of it – one great social community, one great family of being. I would also guess that you behave differently as well, that you have a vastly different sense of right and wrong. I bet you are more inclusive, more empathetic, more caring.

Finally, I want you to know something.

Some of us tried. Some of us dedicated our lives to trying; we gave our lives to trying. Some of us bit the bullet, fell on the sword, were battered and bullied and push around, but we tried. You have to understand that, please understand that. This was so often deeply depressing, soul-wrenching work. There were so few of us and we were so far apart from one another. It wasn't even David versus Goliath. We were just Dave, plain old slump-shouldered hands-in-our-jean-pockets Dave. And Goliath had big friends: Halliburton, Enron, Wal-Mart, most of the world's governments. But we tried. We took the weight of the world on our shoulders knowing full well that our shoulders were not strong enough, that the weight was too great. We tried to write and speak truths that that would change things, to combine passion and ferocity, to reweave community, to do the good hard work of restoration. There are 399 examples in this Forest Log of trying. Please let that count for something.

Many Blessings,

Michael P. Nelson, number 7