

Interview

Technicolour Eruptions of Light in the Darkness: an Interview with Professor Les Back

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Introduction from Ed Wright

Les Back is a professor of sociology at Goldsmiths College, University of London. He is a former Goldsmiths undergraduate and postgraduate student, grew up in New Addington, Croydon, and now lives in Lewisham, not far from the College. Much of his work finds its empirical circumstance in London, and particularly the areas of London in which he grew up and lives (*e.g.* Back, 2007, 2015, 2016; Back and Sinha, 2018). This interview takes one such article as its starting point, originally published in this journal (Back, 2015), which examines the Christmas lights used to decorate New Addington as a conduit into larger sociological discussions of the everyday, including class and community, which are also themes present in his work (*e.g.* Back, 2007, 2009) beyond the article immediately in focus.

Though referred to as an interview, what follows might also be considered a *conversation*, the word ultimately relating to *being in a state of intimate familiarity*, for it is that which I sought through speaking with Les. During the pandemic, much university teaching moved online as a result of distancing measures. Physical closeness to each other was and is essentially forbidden. Contrary to a pervasive popular narrative, however, this does not necessitate *social* distance. To this extent, this interview was conducted in February 2021, during a 'lockdown', to provide undergraduate sociology students the means for a *different way* of developing an intimate familiarity with Back's article on Christmas lights, which we read for a module I lead concerning social divisions, identities, and everyday life. Beyond this, though, the interview was also undertaken to supplement and transcend this reading, allowing for a more general exploration of Back's approach to understanding everyday life.

To the extent that intimate familiarity was sought through this encounter, the interview is partly biographical: Back discusses his path into sociology, which is inextricably linked to growing up in New Addington. Here, he developed an initial taste for sociological inquiry into the everyday. For Back, though, sociology provides tools to generate *a different form* of attention to everyday life, which cannot be achieved simply through being in the world. Back advocates for a sociology of the everyday which is deeply humanistic, concerned foremost with daily struggles individuals face. To achieve such a sociology of everyday life, for Back it is important to trace the relationship between past and present, and in this interview Back discusses the importance of history for the sociology of everyday life. Following this, Back advocates a *vital* sociology, one that is concerned with illuminating and re-enchanting the close to hand in an animated and engaged way. Though it takes as its starting point the article on New Addington published by Les in *Sociology* in 2015 (Back, 2015), overall, then, the interview provides a further understanding of how Back approaches the everyday sociologically, and why it is important to think sociologically about the everyday.

Ed Wright: ...What I've started thinking is just how bizarre it is to be talking about everyday life right now, because everyday life is just so different from what it was a year ago. But, you know, everyday life does remain a really important sociological arena and topic. So, I wondered if we might think about what it means to study everyday life, if we can possibly park the pandemic at all, but also accounting for the pandemic. What does it mean to engage sociologically with everyday life?

Les Back: Well, such a good question. I think actually the question of the pandemic, and living in lockdown might make us *more* attentive, actually, to those routine aspects of life, of the ordinary, you know, what seems ordinary. I go back, oftentimes, there's an essay by Raymond Williams called 'Culture is Ordinary' (Williams, 1958/1989), which is an old one now, published in the mid- to late-fifties, fifty-seven, fifty-eight, something like that where he makes a case: well actually, culture isn't this elevated, the greatest, the best that's ever been thought, or written, or made. Culture is something that we inhabit, routinely. It is an everyday practice, everyday forms in which meaning is made and relationships are forged. So, you know, if you're not interested in *that*, then you're not interested in social life at all. But the thing about it is, practicing or training our attention to those everyday routines of how we actually live, relate to each other, how we remember, how we situate, how we understand ourselves is actually a much harder task than it might appear. I remember I went on the sociologist Laurie Taylor's radio show [BBC Thinking Allowed] and he has this brilliant knack of bringing the best out of the people he has as guests, so I always feel much smarter than I really am in conversation with him, because he brings it out of us in a way. But he also has this amazing knack of asking the question that kind of floors you, or makes you stop and think. And he basically asked me, he said: 'well, given that everyday life is all around us, why don't sociologists write more about everyday life? Why don't more people do sociologies of everyday life?' And, of course, he caught me in the moment, and made me think. And one of the things I said to him at the time that came to me was 'well, actually, it's extremely hard to make those things that are mundane, unremarkable, remarkable and interesting'. And so I'd say that's one part in answer to your question, but you know, I've always thought that in my own journey through studying the social sciences that – I did a degree in social anthropology and geography first, then came to sociology later – the thing that I found completely enchanting and just opened my mind really was the way in which developing a different kind of attention to the world and to learn about ideas that made you see and hear and sense things that were at stake in the very close at hand, the near at hand, that were important, and in some ways it re-encharmed life itself. So that's what I think studying everyday life can do, it can re-

enchant life itself, it makes us think differently, it makes us understand our place in the world and the world itself differently.

EW: Thanks, Les. Just turning to the article we're reading, a follow up question that I have is that in the article you say that you were a student of the 'rhythms of the estate' – that the article is about – 'long before becoming a sociologist' (Back, 2015: 821). So, what do you mean by this? You know, you were saying about how the sociology of everyday life is opening up a different *form* of attention to everyday life than being somebody just living in the everyday. Can you unpack that a little bit perhaps?

LB: Of course. I mean, it was a lovely thing to do write that article, and I did it slightly tongue-in-cheek. How it came about was that there was a call for a special issue of the journal *Sociology*, and I'd had this idea that I'd been thinking about which was really about returning to the place where my family were moved in 1966 on the day of the famous world cup final when England won the World Cup. My family were moved onto the estate there in Croydon called New Addington, which was one of these big council estates which were thought of as places of improvement really, where working-class people in the aftermath of world war two would get better quality of housing, better quality of amenities, and so on. We were moved there in 1966, and I grew up there. I was three at the time, or four, when we moved onto the estate. And we moved around on the estate, a little bit. But that was my social world, really. Actually, the London Borough of Croydon moved, you know, 60,000 low income families to this place, mainly, I think – and we can talk about this later – to keep us all in one place! [laughs]. To move us out of the centre of the city, of the borough really. Croydon fancied itself as being this second financial centre to London, to central London, so there was huge redevelopment, huge financial capital pouring into the construction of massive skyscrapers, many of which remained empty for long periods actually. Anyway... I'd lived there as a child. Now, to come to your point: that was my social world really. That was my universe. And I know many other people who had that sort of 'estate' experience. You know, there's a wonderful book by a poet about the North Peckham estate by Caleb Femi (2020) It's Lynsey Handley (2012) who has written brilliantly about estate life, but it's also Caleb Femi. He's a great poet actually. He writes poetry about concrete. It's fantastic. Anyway, there's something about that as a social world, and I think I became a student of that place partly because of how suffocating that was to grow up there, it felt, you know, a place that was physically separate. It was almost like the forces of history had been swept away, it was only the better housing, and you know, the indoor bathroom, and the nice kitchen. That was it. There was no sense of history there. So, it often felt like a place without history, and it was very disorientating as a young person to try and make sense of it. So, I think partly being a student of this place before discovering sociology came from that, and of course, living in any place involves trying to check things out, see the lie of the land, understand how things work, and then operate and present oneself and be able to survive in that world, you know. As a young man, I started an apprenticeship. The estate had a factory at the centre of it, you know, lots of engineering factories. So, I started in the factory, you know, as a teenager, because that's where my dad and my brother worked, and you know, the forms of abuse and windups that you'd get as an apprentice, you know. Being asked to go to the store and being asked to bring back some holes for nuts – so you'd say, 'can I have some holes for some nuts please?' and you'd get absolutely slaughtered. Or, you know, another one that happened to me all the time, was that I'd be asked to go to the store for a can of tartan paint. So, there was a kind of choreography in this world, that was very coded, on the one hand the windups – the thing to achieve was not to be made a fool of, or to know the codes. And you know, figuring out the lie of the land, we're all doing that all the time. So, in a sense, everybody is cultivating some sense of a sociological imagination because otherwise you don't know how to comport yourself, you don't know how to operate, you know? So that's what I meant. And then later,

through a whole series of accidents of history really, I ended up at Goldsmiths College, studying anthropology, and making the steps towards what I really wanted to learn about which was, you know, these really sort of sociological ideas that really gave me a whole series of resources to make sense of this thing, the challenge of living in that place. Does that make sense? So, it's not that sociology is the trump card. I think that often it's the bridging of the things that we know and those things that we have a feel for, we're both familiar with them, but then they're complete mysteries at the same time. I think that's the other thing about studying everyday life that I'm fascinated by on the one hand we know it from the inside, but then it's also a total maze and a mystery very often. And so, in a way, I think the task is to try and shuttle across those spheres of understanding and learning if that makes sense?

EW: yeah, so it's about: everyone kind of has this embodied knowledge that they take for granted, regardless of if they do sociology, but then the task of the academic practice of sociology is to kind of lay that all bare, you know, to make the familiar strange, if you like. To put it in other words.

LB: To put it in other words, but I've always thought of it as an *enhancement*, rather than a reduction or a translation. You know, much later on, I wrote this book in the nineties, or it began in the nineties, which was really trying to develop and build that. It was published actually after the London bombings in the end, but started it much earlier called *The Art of Listening* (Back, 2007). And I realised that in the end what we're doing, or what I think we're doing, is not sort of translating the experience of growing up into another language, a sociological language. I think what we're trying to do is move across different horizons of understanding. I've always thought it was a bit condescending when sociology professors said, well, 'people are experts in their own lives'. I used to think that, when you'd hear it routinely, that it's a radical gesture. Of course, people outside of the sociological craft and vocation have expertise in own lives, but who among us is really an expert? Christ, we'd never make a mistake if we were. And in a sense, I think what the rich toolbox of sociological ideas gives us is ways to make better sense, and to work with that expertise, and create things actually, that are not things we knew already.

EW: Yeah, I suppose that statement, that people are experts in their own lives, that jars with me a little bit, whenever I hear it. I kind of like it in one way, people are experts in their own lives to some degree, but then there are things that in the mundanity of life that people get on with without considering, or almost can't consider, because if you did consider every micro instance in detail it would be paralysing, right? So, sociology does provide a different viewpoint on everyday life, which, to use another stock phrase, connects the micro and the macro.

LB: Yeah, exactly. And I think that is an important, brilliant, much, much needed capacity. The movement of that sort of imagination, attention and thinking. And thinking for yourself, which is so precious, and you know, I've become much less cautious about making a case for that in recent years. I'm much more strident about the value of those dispositions, and those ways of thinking, and being open to the world, reflecting on it, and our place within that than I've ever been. I think particularly in the last, you know, five years, the kind of atmosphere of [sighs] reductive certainty, the corrosion of careful thought, the perpetuation of flat, outright, bare-faced lies. I think I've become much less inhibited about saying, actually, enough of that. And this is a better way to hold to the world.

EW: [long pause] I'm a bit lost for words there. A very strong, passionate, defence of sociology as a way of thinking that is different from your standard, everyday, ways of thinking about the world, and talking about the world.

LB: Well, you know, partly because I came to it relatively late, and it's been good to me, the world of sociology, it gave me a place where the things that I cared about, particularly the kind of strange, maverick collection of people that I work with here at Goldsmiths, it gave me permission to care about the things I feel are important. Not all of my friends and peers feel the same way about it, but I feel strangely grateful to sociology. So, I'm happy to sort of claim that disposition, for a sociological association. But I just think it's thinking more clearly, more openly, more deeply about things that matter, that are important than the other kinds of, you know, auctions of certainty that pass for our political and public life. I find it totally corrosive, and it debases things that are really, really important. So, I guess, yeah. Strange that you would hear it like that, not strange, but, I just thought 'okay, enough of this', and there are things that we must, I think, make a switch from constantly being in a kind of antithetical, or critical mode, to say criticise everything. I mean, we're brilliant at criticising things in the social sciences. What do we do better than criticism? Well actually, the move towards things that you are not just arguing against, but things you are arguing for, feels like an important pivot to develop in our time. And again, that circles back to why I think everyday life matters.

EW: Yeah, I mean, I started thinking about *The Art of Listening* (Back, 2007), when you were saying that, because that's one of the arguments in *The Art of Listening*, right? It's kind of against this Baumanite, critical sociology, but about actually listening to people, engaging deeply, not necessarily searching for a certainty on a particular thing, but actually deeper thinking, on a long-term basis, right?

LB: I think that's where I came to. And you know, that project, and the one you're reading with your students this week, are linked in the sense that, you know, that book was written at a moment when it was a personal crossroads for me, but it was also a crossroads in my own thinking, you know, that we end up with modes of criticism, or you know, critical thinking that are powerful, and that have a capacity to see through the veneer and the façade of things, but actually come to a point where they're not very good ways to actually live. You know, to actually live and engage with others. That was my limit point, I guess, with the powerful current of what might be thought of in broad terms as anti-humanistic sociology. Where the subject, the person, the fleshy, everyday individual, unfolding life becomes almost like 'we're not interested in that'. We're interested in the discourses that move through people, we're interested in the forms of structuring experience, the ways in which the human is in a way constituted through language. Not the human, *life* is constituted through language and power, and the actual experiences of a person is less important. And it's in the different strands of post-structuralism, but it's also there in the actor-network type theory that's inspired by Bruno Latour (e.g. Latour 1996). I can't really do a version of sociology that isn't interested in the plight of that individual person. And the sociology without that individual connection is not the kind of sociology that I want to invest in.

EW: It's interesting, the focus on the individual, but then the article we're primarily discussing today also has a very large historical component. So, why is that historical component there, then?

LB: You know, it's the old adage about 'if you forget history, then you just repeat it'. But, I mean, not just that. It's another thing. You have these ideas, and I'm sure you have them too, they're things that really just ... they hit you. And you think: 'oh, that's right! I need to hold onto that'. And, Antonio Gramsci, who is one of my favourite writers, has this idea in the prison notebooks (Gramsci, 1929-1935/1971) about, you know, the past, or history itself, leaves in us, in us all, *an infinity of traces*. So, the past deposits in every single individual life, I think you can extend this, an infinity of traces. The past is deposited in us. The trick though, that Gramsci says, is that it doesn't leave us with an inventory to recover them. So, they're in us, they're deposited in us really deeply, but we're

not aware of them, but they're kind of mysteries as well. They're *mysterious* traces. In a way, those individual lives are profoundly the bearers and carriers of the historical formation of the places and the lives that unfold. I'm really a frustrated historian in so many ways, you know I think that relationship between the past and the present is such an important thing to keep in mind, and it's partly a funny thing, why am I so obsessed with the history of things? For example, I'm doing this little side project which is about the history of the bricks that were used to make that estate that the Christmas lights are used to decorate. The material culture contains those traces of the past. The imprint of the past. You know, they're there for reasons which tell us something, not only about the past, but about the present and the realities of those places, how they came to be.

EW: so that's the sociological point, isn't it? That's why it's not just an exercise in history. It's because making sense of today requires an engagement with, well in this case, where that place came from.

LB: yeah, so much. So much. It's kind of a sociological disposition as well. Those histories aren't taught. Power has a way of invisibilising, of normalising, of flattening, of bleaching out the traces of the past, that don't fit within the dominant interest of those who decide what the past was, and what the present is now. So, you kind of have to rub history, and you have to rub social life against the grain, as Walter Benjamin (1968) once said, to uncover that, to find it actually, to see what's there in plain sight. And the people I admire the most, and still admire are the ones who have a knack for taking something very mundane, and thinking 'okay, look at this' and now understand something else. You know, Stuart Hall had this fantastic – Professor Stuart Hall – had this fantastic story I heard him tell a lot of times. 'I think the English are interesting, not just sort of as a geographical area, but culturally interesting. Much more than the English people think they're interesting. I mean, take the cup of tea, as a kind of symbol of Englishness. What is more quintessentially English than a cup of tea?' [pauses] 'where does the tea come from? Where does the sugar come from?' You know, in that everyday – I've had about ten cups of tea today I think – there is the trace of this places connection to its imperial past, plantations in the Caribbean, to plantation slavery, to plantation societies in India and South East Asia, and modes of production which in many respects were the kind of engine houses and rooms for England, England's kind of financial fortunes. I know it wasn't just England, and there's a story in Scotland too, so it's not just the province of England, but you know, where can we find that story of empire, of globalisation? We can find it every day when we wake up, put the kettle on and make a cup of tea. That's where it is!

EW: Yeah, I mean, I have to say, I've shared that anecdote, I might have pinched it from you, I've pinched it from someone else of course, because it was Stuart Hall's, but I've shared that general anecdote about the cup of tea. And I've extended on it a little bit further, you know. Think about how you fill up your kettle even. How did the pipes get there? Who made the cup? Who made the kettle? And you can branch out from these very mundane objects to stories of globalisation, supply chains, manufacturing in the global south as well as colonialism. So, it's about finding those larger social structures in these very mundane actions.

LB: So, I think that, in of itself, is a warrant for the study of everyday life. You know, there's another one that I just came to recently, and you know, these things are all hiding in plain sight. In the '60s and '70s: I really loved corned beef. Corned beef sandwiches, it's like: 'oh wow, a treat!'. And then just suddenly, I just asked myself, why is it called corned beef? And anyway, this led to a bit of an historical excavation. It's not called corned beef because there's any corn in it, it's called corned beef because the ancient English reference to salt would be salt corns. Corned beef is salted beef, like the salted beef that is part of the Jewish tradition. It's about preserving beef. And its history is deeply connected to colonisation and empire. Irish beef was turned into corned beef and preserved, sold to

French colonialists who used corned beef to feed slaves in the Caribbean, and slaveholders. So, it's a form of meat that can be preserved and can travel. So, you know, the English colonising Ireland, effectively stealing the meat that was being cultivated and grown on Irish soil, turned into tinned meat that is then sold to French imperial interests, that then used that preserved meat to feed slaves, that are working on the sugar plantations, that then move back and are the sweet traces in the bottom of our cups of tea. See what I mean? It's everywhere! That's what I mean, Ed, by enchantment, or re-enchantment. That's a bloody, brutal history, but it suddenly makes you think 'God, really?' There's a way of understanding imperialism and colonisation as I pick up a tin of meat in the supermarket. It's right there, it's that close.

EW: So, in a really roundabout way, we've already answered the question of why you focussed on Christmas lights...

LB: [laughs].

EW: But can you just tease out further why you focussed on Christmas lights in this article?

LB: Well, it's something I became aware of... I wrote a very short piece about it first, partly because I don't live on the estate where I grew up, but I live very, very close to it. I moved less than ten miles from Croydon, to Lewisham which is where Goldsmiths College is based. Though I lived on the estate, which is the focus of this article, until I was 18. Four to 18, those formative years. But my family, my mum, my brother, extended family still live in that place, or they did live until they passed away. I would go back there, and particularly at Christmas time, you would notice the difference in that short drive through the suburbs of London, some of them incredibly well-heeled and very rich, and some of them not actually. Some of them the place where these big public housing estates were built, so that those in the inner city were moved to better housing. So, I would just encounter it, and I was kind of fascinated by it, the very stark contrast, and I started to think about what's going on there. What's that all about? And then I would use it as a kind of way to make students laugh, actually, and say: 'well, what colour Christmas lights do you have? What does it say about you, those choices?' And there's an argument then, there's not a pattern that completely holds, but there are patterns that people recognise! And I think 'yeah! I don't know why that is!' And it was an interesting and useful and fun way to try and illustrate, *illuminate* if you like, Bourdieu's (e.g. Bourdieu, 1979/2010) arguments about what's at stake in cultural tastes, and distinction-making, and how quite often these are kind of ordinary, everyday mechanisms through which a place in the world is marked, you know. Or that you are invested in trying to present yourself. And I was interested in trying to write a history of this place, because, you know, I had moved from thinking that these large, public housing estates were the worst of all possible worlds, as Phil Cohen (1980/2005) once characterised them, to thinking differently about them. I found growing up there, stifling, suffocating, separated out from, you know, the vital and quite live and lively world of working class communities which were in London, which my family knew and were connected to, and which I visited on a regular basis. These places in the suburbs, which were intended to be places of improvement, felt very, very suffocating. I wanted to try and make sense of what was happening in my own family life, but also the sociological realm. So that's partly where it came from, and then, the thing about Christmas, and the rhythms of everyday life became a vehicle to tell that bigger story.

EW: So that's the Christmas lights then, isn't it? It's not Christmas lights as an end in themselves, it's that Christmas lights are like a conduit or a route towards discussing something far larger.

LB: Definitely, I mean it's the resonance they have in everyday life, and the things that they carry in everyday life. The estate that is the focus, New Addington, it's not the only one. There's loads of

them actually. It wasn't just one set of people, they were everywhere. So, in the winter, at Christmas, the estate would be largely dark. And then as you drive through it, it's still the case now, there would be these *eruptions* of light, technicolour, with all these massive inflatable Santas and all this sort of stuff. These *technicolour eruptions of light in the darkness*. It was very compelling just to see them. I thought there was something about them that was bizarre and beautiful at the same time. And then I realised that there was something about them that would conjure and provoke responses of disgust from outside of those worlds. *Crass, cultureless*. It coincided with the popularisation of the idea of the 'chav', you know, and the sorts of stigma that people like Imogen Tyler (e.g. 2008, 2020) have gone on to write about. There was a sort of moment where that kind of class hatred became respectable. So that's how it happened. But you know, you can imagine, I'm sat there with this tripod that I'm setting up in the street at night with a digital camera, trying to get a decent portrayal in the darkness, of this kind of explosion of light. So, I started doing it, and then, and it was just something that I couldn't let go of. It's not the rituals of Christmas, it's what it tells us about the big questions about community, class, taste, how we live and how we inhabit those big sociological divisions and experiences, and patterns of culture.

EW: So, *community*, then. To some extent these lights produce class disgust by the other, but then how do they work towards producing a feeling of community?

LB: So, yeah, that was the other thing that I became really fascinated by. Because, on the one hand, they would produce disgust, and in the days as social media started to take hold, you would see it circulating. But there'd be something else circulating too, and I became really fascinated by those forms of everyday, community association connectedness, recognition, that circulate in every neighbourhood. Even ones that are characterised as being sort of 'no go' areas, or 'sink estates' or 'failures'. It's interesting in terms of the government's response to class stigma, and particularly around estates, and 'sink estates' – people are writing excellent work about this now – is to stop using the word 'estate'. [laughs]. Stop using the word, and it'll disappear. Of course, it doesn't. But, those forms of what Loïc Wacquant would call 'territorialised stigma' (e.g. Wacquant, 2008) is incredibly strong. But within those worlds, which were characterised from outside as being 'no go' areas, places of social attrition, of crime, of violence, all of this terrible stuff - and terrible stuff does happen in those places, there is social damage, no question about that, that inequality produces – but that characterisation, it misses so much of those unremarkable, uncelebrated, small recognitions, associations. The thing that fascinated me was that people would come together to watch – hundreds, sometimes – the turning-on of someone's individual house Christmas lights. There would be 500 people in the street, you know, in some cases. So, they would become places of mutual recognition, of fun, of enjoyment, of care as well. And I think those kinds of things are easily looked past. They easily go undocumented, or unremarked upon. In a way that comes back to where we started. I think a sociology of everyday life, the value of it, the ethics of it, the politics of it, can be summarised as that: remarking upon those things that are important, that would otherwise be unremarked upon. I still think that's, you know, where the value of what we do can be found. I remember that in the best writing I read as a student, when you think 'God, yeah, that makes sense', or 'oh, yeah, that's very close to something that's familiar to me that I'd never thought about'. So, yeah, it's in that spirit, I guess.

EW: So, I suppose a final follow-up question, to draw that theme out a little bit further, is: why does studying everyday life matter?

LB: Well, I think it helps us makes sense of our own place in the world, I think, at its best. I think it also helps us tell the story of history from below. From the close at hand. Not from the remote, abstract, people-less version of the past, which is often the way. I think in that familiarity, the

proximity of everyday life, and our relation to it, is an opportunity not only to take those things that we assume, and make them comprehensible differently, to take the unfamiliar and make it comprehensible, to decode it in some way, crack the code of culture if you like. It can be that, and I think it importantly can be that, but I think it is also a different way of thinking about where we start as thinkers, and where we start as people who are trying to understand the world. We're trying to understand the world at the most familiar, proximate, and close at hand. I've always thought that that sort of, where to portray your attention, that way of thinking has always been very, very compelling to me. I wasn't interested in going somewhere else, far away. I was always much more interested in the *invitation* that is issued to us, to take those things that are close, that we half-understand, that we recognise, that we partially comprehend, but not fully, their meaning, their significance, their history, and to make a different kind of sense of the world. So, one of my slogans [laughs] which comes back to bite me occasionally, is: I want a version of sociology that is *vital*. A live sociology. A sociology that is as alive as the world we inhabit. At the same time, I was very pleased with myself when I had that idea, because in a way – I wasn't pleased with myself for very long, but at least initially – it's live in the sense of the vitality, the living nature of things, to write about the world as vital. At the same time, it's a way to live. It's a verb. It's a way to conduct oneself. And the kinds of things that we talked about at the beginning, the values that I feel much less defensive about advocating and what that involves: attentiveness, careful thought, living with doubt in the service of understanding. Those sorts of dispositions become a way *to live*, to conduct oneself.

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