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## King, Levinas and the interruption of love: The alchemy of the fire fable

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### Cover Page Footnote

This manuscript represents the culmination of a collaboration between Dr. Claire LeBeau, Dr. Randy Horton and Kaleb Sinclair, Master of Arts in Psychology student from Seattle University during the 2020 and 2021 year following the death of George Floyd in May of 2020. This collaboration was presented on March 20th, 2021 at the 17th meeting of the Psychology for the Other Conference at Seattle University under the title, "The Fire Fable: A vision of our shared vulnerability and humanity."

The accompanying musical piece to the article by LeBeau & Sinclair is titled *The Fire Fable*, and was performed by Ann Labounsky. The following are her remarks on her performance.

I listened to Kaleb Sinclair's presentation during the [Psychology for the Other] conference and was very moved by his words, especially in his description of the *Fire Fable* that he described in response to the death of George Floyd. I saw his description of it in musical terms in three parts using three contrasting musical themes. The first part (the Pangea) in which there was only one fire and great empathy. That was followed by two fires and discord represented by another theme in a minor mode. Finally, hope returns in the third part.

Ann Labounsky studied improvisation in Paris with Jean Langlais and teaches organ and improvisation at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh.

*These unquestioned convictions are so many extraneous flashes that bedevil the proper illumination that the mind must build up in any project of the discursive reason. Everyone should seek to destroy within himself these blindly accepted convictions. Everyone must learn to escape the rigidity of mental habits formed by contact with familiar experiences. Everyone must destroy even more carefully than his phobias, his 'philiias,' his complacent acceptance of first intuitions.*

Bachelard – *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*

*Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long possessed that he is set free - he has set himself free - for higher dreams, for greater privileges.*

Baldwin – *Nobody Knows My Name*

Levinas begins *Totality and Infinity* with a haunting allusion from the 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, “though the true life is absent”, we are in the world. This lamentation is a fitting beginning for his exposition of a radical reformulation of an Ethics that precedes all thought, language, or systematic attempts to cast morality as a Truth. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. presented a lamentation for a dream of a world where the transcendence of race, creed, or classification of any kind could allow children to grow up to be first ethical human beings in relation to one another before identities. The source of this sorrow and lament points also to its relent; if we can dream and then imagine this “true life”, then we can begin to devote our strivings to bringing it to life, to manifesting something that is prior to our means-to-an-end destructive proclivities, in other words, an end to war. Both visionaries asked us to participate in the imagining or dreaming of a different future while drawing from a past that was absorbed in our collective ancient memories, visions of what was perhaps once ours as our ontogenetic and phylogenetic indigenous birthright, the “true life” of our human interconnection and interdependency.

KEYWORDS: King, Levinas, Interruption, Love, Indigenous Wisdom, Fire Fable

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# King, Levinas and the Interruption of Love: The Alchemy of the Fire Fable

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Levinas begins *Totality and Infinity* with a haunting allusion from the 19<sup>th</sup> century French poet Arthur Rimbaud, “though the true life is absent”, we are in the world.<sup>1</sup> This lamentation is a fitting beginning for his exposition of a radical reformulation of an Ethics that precedes all thought, language, or systematic attempts to cast morality as a Truth. Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. presented a lamentation for a dream of a world where the transcendence of race, creed, or classification of any kind could allow children to grow up to first be ethical human beings in relation to one another before identities. The source of this sorrow and lament points also to its relent; if we can dream and then imagine this “true life”, then we can begin to devote our strivings to bringing it to life, to

manifesting something that is prior to our means-to-an-end destructive proclivities, in other words, an end to war. Both visionaries asked us to participate in the imagining or dreaming of a different future while drawing from a past that was absorbed in our collective ancient memories, visions of what was perhaps once ours as our ontogenetic and phylogenetic indigenous birthright, the “true life” of our human interconnection and interdependency.

While Levinas and King were born a generation apart, on different continents, across widely disparate cultures, languages, races, and faiths, the vocational and spiritual paths of both coincided in deeply tethering ways. Both were born into situations of

holocaust and war. Both were shaped by the horrors of systematic violence and objectifying justification for unspeakable infliction of human suffering. Astonishingly, in response, rather than being obsessed with vengeance and retaliation, both were concerned about peace and the conditions through which peace could be conceived of and epistemologically founded. Radical selfless love was their compass and their unwavering path regardless, or perhaps because, of the ideality of this proposition. In the face of the violence and brutality of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, both prophets sought the most radical of responses, the interruption of the will for oneself through extreme sacrifice in the willingness to die for the other. Only through the gratuitousness and excessive manifestation of love could the retaliatory, and as King pointed out ultimately suicidal, pursuits of power and dominion be upended. For King, the collective force of the people living satyagraha<sup>2</sup>, or truth power, through the solidarity of nonviolent presence paved the path for moral awakening. For Levinas, the singularity of this purpose took shape at the radically local level of the face-to-face, where the transcendent Other teaches me and calls me to infinite responsibility.

## King and Collective Interruption

While many scholars debate whether King's thought could be characterized as philosophy or theology, the influences on his work seem to stem, in part, from his atypical training from a very young age (Brit, 2012). King graduated from High School at 15, from Morehouse at 19, seminary at Corzer at 22, and Boston University with his Ph.D. at 25. Most scholars agree that King could be best characterized as a Personalist. Personalism<sup>3</sup> was a philosophical and theological movement originating in the 19th century that emphasized the uniqueness of each human person. The central themes of personalism were: that human beings are distinctive ontologically from other types of animal and plant life; each person has unique and inherent worth, value and dignity; subjectivity and interiority depend on reflective awareness and self-consciousness; human beings are self-determining or agentic; and human beings are foundationally social and relational and therefore find fruition in communion with other human beings. Most notable personalists<sup>4</sup> gravitated to these values and positions for need of "emancipatory praxis" or liberation philosophies of conscience out of context dependent necessity

(Davidson & Davidson, 2012). The question of whether or not King should be taken seriously as a philosopher as such minimizes the moral and religious imperative of his organic lived context as a social activist fighting against social evil. Against the backdrop of the inhumanity, murder, and racial hatred of slavery and Jim Crow era genocide, King, as a prophet, emerged as a torch bearer for human freedom and dignity animated by the force of love, which Cornel West (2015) described, "for King, the condition of truth was to allow suffering to speak; for him, justice is what love looks like in public" (p. x). King knew that when suffering is allowed to speak, humanity can live towards an eschatology, or the ultimate destiny of humanity, of peace in the Beloved Community. For all who live the human struggle of subjugation and oppression, both oppressor and oppressed, the movement and the meaning of philosophy has to begin here.

Consider the idea as George Yancy (2012) does in his essay on *King's Philosophy of Religion: Theology of Somebodiness* that black experience begins from a position where white racism renders her as a "nobody" or "an ontological cipher" (p. 44). With this as a starting point, King (1967/2015) unwaveringly pointed our gaze to the truth that black people "are still impoverished aliens in an affluent society" (p. 168). In his last presidential address to the SCLC in 1967, King pointed the way to genuine power and freedom in the restructuring of American society, against the triple and interrelated evils of racism, economic exploitation and systemic poverty, and war in militarism, through the marriage of power and love. This is not a sentimental or self-serving love, not

a love of wisdom, but a "love implementing the demands of justice", the living expression of the wisdom of love. The foundation for this movement and this marriage of power and love first must come when, he told the conference, the black man "can say to himself and to the world 'I am somebody. I am a person'" (p. 170). King understood that true emancipation can only come from living the truth that I matter, that my life has meaning and dignity, and that my struggles and my cries will not go out unheard or unanswered.

Through non-violent resistance, King (1963/2010) saw that a "third way" between passive surrender and reactive retribution could be opened. He wrote that this "combines tough mindedness and tender-heartedness and avoids the complacency and do-nothingness of the soft minded and the violence and bitterness of the hard hearted" (p. 8). Consider for a moment the immensity and courage of this position in the situation where King's home was fire-bombed with his wife and baby inside. Outraged supporters gathered outside their home determined to seek revenge. King addressed the crowd first to urge them to not panic or retaliate. In his next statement to the crowd that night, he asked them to go further than simply leave peacefully, "We must love our white brothers', I said, 'no matter what they do to us. We must make them know that we love them'" (King, 1958/2015, p. 10). Psychologically and spiritually, this call for the "third way" requires on constant devotion and commitment to patience in the true meaning of this word, *pati*, to suffer. In this philosophy, there are two possible answers to the question of violence. One is to resort to same

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1 The actual quote from Rimbaud is made with regard to the experience of reading, he wrote "What a life! The true life is elsewhere. We are not on the world". This word choice is interesting insofar as he says "elsewhere". The imagined world can indeed feel more real than the one we inhabit. Dreaming, imagining, and reading can take on a life of its own, more experientially real or meaningful than the ones we live in. Our binary constitution of these forms of meaning making as either "real" or "unreal" places priority on the world that is measured and waking. Yet, I imagine that for the adolescent poet Rimbaud, the true life was the real world that inspired, or breathed into, a longed-for world, a world where meaning can be accessed and made manifest, transcending the objectifying hellscapes of everyday lived misery and pain. Mathieu, B. (1991), "Introduction" in Rimbaud, Arthur, and Mathieu, Bertrand (translator), *A Season in Hell & Illuminations*, BOA Editions.

2 Martin Luther King and other Civil Rights leaders like James Lawson were deeply influenced at the spiritual and tactical level by the social justice movement of Ghandi in India.

3 Personalism is a more diffused and eclectic movement and has no shared common reference point. It is, in point of fact, more proper to speak of many *personalisms* than one personalism. LaCroix described personalism as an "anti-ideology" which is galvanized by the particular contexts of dehumanizing social and political alienation. In this sense, personalism is a deeply situated priority which emphasized the moral foundation of each person as capable of meta-consciousness or awareness of self and therefore as capable of deliberative decision-making (Williams, T. D. & Bengtsson, J. O., 2020).

4 Other notable philosophers that adhered to many of these ideas where Walt Whitman, William James, Gordon Allport, Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, Jacques Maritain, Max Scheler, and William Stern (Williams, T. D. & Bengtsson, J. O., 2020).

methods and means of the oppressor, namely physical violence and intimidation and the other is non-violent resistance. At stake in this principle of non-violence or “moral force” are the sanctity of life, human freedom, and the inevitable common fate of both oppressor and oppressed. A tough mind and tender heart opens the door for a non-antagonistic and non-allergic relationship between self and other.

The immensity of the collective petition for nonviolence remains the most radical, in terms of getting to the root, of all notions. It is also perhaps the most counterintuitive of philosophies especially when we consider the prevalence of power doctrines of eye for an eye. It can be hard to truly grasp the immensity of what King’s love requires of us in order to meet violence with commensurate passivity. West (2015) writes, “Dr. King understood radical love as a form of death—a relentless self-examination in which a fearful, hateful, egoist self dies daily to be reborn into a courageous, loving, and sacrificial self” (p. xvi). This love, as we know, was not just theoretical but something that King lived and was willing to and did die for.

Throughout the middle of the twentieth century, the work of the Southern Christian Leadership Committee (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was to seek witness for social, political and economic enfranchisement by means of non-violent presence. SCLC civil and human rights activist Bernard Lafayette (2018), who worked closely with King to develop and institutionalize non-violent leadership, said;

The non-violent approach is radical. Radical enough to believe that under the worst conditions, there is hope; it’s radical enough to believe that people who display the most insensitive kinds of attitudes can be changed. Its ultimate goal is to win your opponents over, so

you can psychologically disarm them. You confront your opponent and you look your opponent in the eye, so they do not see you as a target but as a human being. So you are forcing your humanity on them. (Kunhardt, 2018, 0:37:13)

King (1958/2015) famously detailed his journey in the development of his understanding of this “third way” in his commitment to non-violence in his essay *Pilgrimage to Non-violence*, which ultimately became institutionalized through a wide range of civil rights movements. The six principles of non-violence that King outlined are as follows:

1. Non-violence is not a method for cowards, or to put it more positively, it is a way of life for courageous people. It is passive physically while being active spiritually. It is active non-violent resistance to evil.
2. It does not seek to humiliate but to win friendship and understanding. The goal of this principle is to ultimately lead to reconciliation, healing, in the foundation of the Beloved Community.
3. Its protest is directed at evil forces, not evil people. The importance of this principle cannot be overstated because it is distinctively phenomenological and ethical in nature. This priority stresses the conditions through which conflict emerges rather than making character assessments and evaluations about one’s opponent.
4. There is a willingness to accept suffering without retaliation. This deeply challenging principle rests on the belief that “unearned suffering is redemptive” (p. 50) and, as Gandhi practiced, can have morally educative and transformational purposes.

5. The nonviolent attitude refuses not only external violence to the opponent but also internal violence of the spirit, or in other words, it refuses to hate the opponent. In describing this principle, King details different kinds of love but stressed that this attitude is Agapeic in nature, or a disinterested kind love, where God is operating on the human heart. King wrote, “when I am commanded to love, I am commanded to restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brothers” (p. 53).

6. The universe is on the side of justice. This principle is grounded in faith for the future though the creative generosity and commensurate contagion of goodness and benevolence (pp. 49-53).

The generative force of these principles have inspired some of the greatest leaders and social justice movements throughout the world. They are more than mere tactics. They are foundational ways of living where the human heart becomes a constant study of gentleness and the source of Gandhian satyagraha, truth or soul force (p. 44).

### Levinas and Individual Interruption

Levinas, a Lithuanian born Jewish French ethics philosopher who developed his original framework for an individual ethics of responsibility following WWII when his father and brothers were killed, did not write specifically about psychological humility or pain and the systemic roots of human suffering from poverty, racism, and violence. Yet, he did write about the interpersonal origins of ethics and the inversion of the existential question of the *courage to be* (Tillich, 1952) towards the more foundational social human question of the *courage to be-for*. Like Heidegger, Levinas struggled with the question of the meaning of human existence, or

what makes human existence inherently meaning-full. Levinas’ fundamental critique of Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* is its perpetual concern for and return to itself, what Levinas calls “the Same.” *Dasein* has as its primary issue its own death and its own Being. In this solipsistic cycle, *Dasein*, even as fundamentally “Being-with,” cannot encounter the Other without returning to its own Being. *Dasein* is always “with” others in shared projects and engaged in positive modes of solicitude or deficient modes of indifference, but it is always *Dasein* that is in charge, so to speak, as its primary debt is to itself, its own Being. Levinas challenges the side-by-side facing the world of *Dasein* “with” and looks rather to the “encounter” of the “face-to-face” in ethical subjectivity. For Levinas, the necessity of interruption of the question of Heideggerian Being or ontology was the first point of departure for the movement of peace, the actual condition through which each person is literally born, from pain to passage, from solipsism to sacrifice for something greater than ourselves, from concern for my own death to an obsession with not letting the Other die alone. These were also the foundations that Martin Luther King Jr. lived and died for.

It is surprising, given the many connections between these two thinkers, that there has been very little scholarship drawing into the parallels between their work. One notable exception comes from the work of Davidson and Davidson (2012) who wrote that the connections between King and Levinas are both political and personal in the sense that “it concerns how individuals and institutions can be transformed to avoid the total threat of violence and establish a just peace in its place” (p. 199). For Levinas, the defense of an “eschatology of messianic peace” in the face of “the ascendancy of war” rests on the following central themes: 1) as with Lafayette’s statement of the actual mechanics of non-violent protest, the ethical

resistance of the face of the Other, 2) the ultimate “inviolability of the other person”, who can never be erased or metaphysically annihilated, 3) as with the fourth principle of Kingian or Gandhian inspired non-violence, there is redemptive power in human suffering and sacrifice through paradoxically gratuitous and transcendent love, and finally 4) true peace can never be self-generated in a closed system which simply returns to itself and confirms its own bias, or, in other words, peace can only occur through “proximity” to the Other (p. 200). While the convergences between the thought of King and Levinas are striking, they diverge in the overall focus of how ethics manifests and takes shape<sup>5</sup>. Levinas’ ethics is grounded first in the ethical dyad of the face-to-face before what he calls “the third” at the level of other others in institutions or collectives. King’s ethics moves out of necessity at the level of community and shared progress towards the Beloved Community. Yet, despite these epistemological differences, both movements are essential to the creation of a world where the movement of love can, in fact, interrupt systems of violence which manifest through the objectification of the other in the refusal of the other’s humanity.

Like King, for Levinas, love and justice are deeply intertwined. Psychologically, it is important to explore how the interconnected movements of love and justice operate at the radically local level of the individual human heart. Throughout his philosophical and spiritual becoming, Levinas was devoted to unpacking the origins of a radical ethics, prior to ontology, or the egoic solipsistic

enclosure of the singular person, what he described as the return to the Same. Levinas described the enactment of ethical subjectivity as the encounter of the “face to face” relation (Levinas 1961/ 1969). He believed that this instance of the face to face is the metaphysical ground of ethics, which precedes ontology and, in fact, stands outside of time and space. In the instance of this encounter with the Other, what Levinas calls “the gaze,” I am called first and foremost to be responsible for the Other because, paradoxically, it is vulnerability that makes the first claim. He writes, “this gaze is precisely the epiphany of the face as a face. The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to give. But it is to give to the master, to the lord, to him whom one approaches as ‘You’ in a dimension of height. (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 75) In his Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas names the core issue at stake in the elevation of ontology at the expense of ethics. He names the issue war, or as he says, “the mobilization of absolutes,” the totalization of the individual, and the illusion that objectification of the human being can accomplish its task of object-making. That this is, in fact, an illusion he spends his life’s work explaining. War does not accomplish peace but only more violence and war. Levinas writes, “my freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone” (p. 101).

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961/1969), Levinas consistently uses the word *apology* with regard to the movement of conscience in the act of being called into question by the Other. As with many of Levinas’ terms, it is easy to misconstrue this word in a literal sense

as communicated apology or an expression of regret and acknowledgment of a failure. The word apology comes from the Latin *apo* or ‘away’ and *logia* or ‘word’ or ‘speech’. From Plato to modern usage, the word apology has come to mean a form of defense, regret, or self-justification for injury or wrong-doing. Levinas, however, uses the word apology to indicate rather a movement away from self towards the Other in discourse. Ethics, for Levinas, is founded on this movement away from the solipsistic enclosure of my reason and my word. This movement is not rooted in a defensive posture or even a process that begins in me because it is rather a “calling into question my spontaneity” or “a calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge” (p. 43). What this means is that I am not the source of truth.

Levinas deepens the description of this movement away from self in *Otherwise Than Being* (1981/1998) where Levinas emphasizes the radical passivity of the process of ethical resistance as “*denucleation*,” or “the coring out” of the nucleus of the ego (Levinas, 1998, p. 64). This “coring out” is for Levinas the necessary drawing away from the “complacency of subjectivity” as “for-itself,” towards the “one-for-the-other” (p. 64). Ultimately, Levinas locates the zenith of ethical subjectivity in the trope of the maternal gestational body, where the Other is closer to me than I am to myself and my giving to the Other occurs prior to thought and language. He writes, “in the form of responsibility, the psyche in the soul is the other in me” (p. 69). This proximity locates the source of justice, prior to the advent of the third party, consciousness itself, and even the idea of truth, in the surplus of meaning that comes *through me* as a bearing of suffering, rather than *from me* as an ego or an identity, from the Other, whose signification speaks through their exposure and vulnerability. My subjectivity comes from being uniquely elected by the Other to bear their suffering,

to be for them, to be rendered response-able. This being elected by the Other, as the source of my subjectivity, begins with being torn away from myself, “cored out”, as one who can bear the suffering for the vulnerable Other. I can choose to bear this suffering or not, but I cannot choose the election.

Kunz (1981/1998) describes the paradox of the subject’s freedom: “the self finds its meaning, not centered in itself as an ego establishing its individual freedom and power, but as a self facing the other person who calls the self out of its center to be ethically responsible” (p. 34). This is the paradox of power and weakness that Kunz elaborates; namely, that even while power, as a force in the service of ego, ontology and the return to the Same, is seductive and corrupting and human, it is the weakness, vulnerability and unmitigated call of the Other to be responsible that renders power powerless. The Other, at all times, at every turn, resists my ideas, my notions, my categories. The Other cannot be made to be a means to my end, even if I subjugate her flesh and even if I kill her body. Ethical power paradoxically exists only as ontological weakness through openness, receptivity, vulnerability, and compassionate presence to the Other. Kunz writes, it is from this place of humility that “I discover that my deepest understanding begins from the awe of the infinite incomprehensibility of the Other . . . when I return the power invested in me by the Other and direct it toward the good of the Other, I authentically find myself” (p. 107).

Concerning “the inviolability of the other person” (Davidson & Davidson, p. 200) and the movement and origins of peace as an interruption of the conditions for war and totality, it is important to note that both King and Levinas believed in the ultimate impossibility for violence to achieve its goal of killing or annihilating the other person. In a very real way for Levinas, objectification

5 Davidson and Davidson (2012) also detail the divergences between both men in terms of their expressions of political action for the “praxis of peace” and if there can even be a justification for the war against war. These questions of the role of the institutions of the State are indeed complex in the arena of the polis. This is why both King and Levinas have much to teach for both share a core understanding that empathy eclipses knowledge or ideas and, as Levinas wrote, “justice is impossible without the one that renders it finding himself in proximity” (Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 159).



does not stand when the Other is always more than any thought or idea I could have of him or her. When the origins of my subjectivity come from the ontological sovereignty of the Other in the face-to-face encounter, the first imperative or command of the Other is “the ethical impossibility of killing him” which thus “marks the end of powers” because “he overflows absolutely every idea I can have of him” (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 87). In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas offers an alternative in the inversion of power as power through the “heroic will,” or the interruption of the will for itself, and opens the possibility that I can “die as a result of someone and for someone” (pp. 238-239, emphasis original). The ultimate movement that can give my life meaning here is that I can give my life for someone, as he writes in *Otherwise than Being*, to the point of being “hostage” to the Other as far as “substitution” and “expiation” (pp. 113-118), which “makes possible the paradoxical psychological possibilities of putting oneself in the place of another” (p. 146). Levinas also linked these ideas in his Talmudic writings to “holiness” (*kadosh*) saying that “ultimate holiness is the acceptance of justice or death without resistance, accepting this nothingness and yet nevertheless having this reflex of goodness, of value” (Saint-Cheron, 2010, p. 18). King, in fact, became one of the ultimate examples of this holiness, not only through the non-violent justice movement, but in his willingness to forfeit his own life for the Other. More than ever throughout the last 53 years since his murder, we see the truth of this inviolability, in the living example of King’s message and memory.

### The Dream of the “True Life” in Proximity

The First Law of indigenous peoples or First Peoples (as well as the first law of thermodynamics) is that nothing in life is created or destroyed, only moved or changed in between systems. The Second Peoples, as inheritors

of the Aristotelean legacy of linearity, that everything has a beginning, middle, and end, have followed a law that “systems must be isolated and exist in a vacuum of individual creation, beginning in complexity but simplifying and breaking down until they meet their end” (Yunkaporta, 2020, p. 45). Yunkaporta (2020), an Aboriginal Australian scholar, writes that the human species is a “custodial” people who must follow the First Law, which we all are a part of, “to be brave enough to apply it to our reality of infinitely interconnected, self-organizing, self-renewing systems” (p. 51). As a custodial species, interrupting our systems of power, apex, and dominion requires that we invert our linear and hierarchical patterns of thinking of the world and each other as possessions of control and subjugation in order to re-discover, re-claim, re-member our original ancestral knowledge of our collective interdependency.

If we can dream and imagine it, then we can begin to bring it to life. But perhaps our dreams are simply the echoes of our collective ancient memories, which surface through the long night of sleep, fear and loneliness to show us the way toward a new future. In his last writings before his death, King pointed to this truth;

In a very real sense, all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor impoverishes the rich; the betterment of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother’s keeper because we are our brother’s brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. A final problem that mankind must solve in order to survive in the world house that we have inherited is finding an alternative to war and destruction. (King, 1967/2015, p. 87)

Levinas too calls us to seek our “Promised Land” not through collapse into our own solipsistic self-interest but “as an absolute orientation toward the Other, as sense, a work is

possible only in patience, which pushed to the limit, means the Agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering into the Promised Land” (Levinas 1964/1996, pp. 49-50). This experience of acting without promise of redemption is a central theme of the movement of interruption and ultimately peace. It is true, as Levinas writes, “the relationship with the other puts me into question, empties me of myself and empties me without end, showing me ever more resources. I did not know I was so rich, but I no longer have the right to keep anything for myself” (p. 52).

To return to the beginning, what is the “true life” that Levinas and Rimbaud were referring to? Today, in 2021, this question has become increasingly important to explore and reclaim. Our collective antagonism and allergy to each other and the natural world has become the hallmark of our alienation, isolation, and the dis-ease or pathology of loneliness (van den Berg, 1972). In other words, the root of our illness and suffering is intersubjective and social in nature; we are alone or rather, we live as though we are. But this is not the “true life”. The “true life” is one of community, proximity, and shared custodial interdependency. The World House, the Beloved Community, the Promised Land, and the dream of this life can be found in our ancient memory, in surviving the long night with the light of the fire and each other for warmth.

### The Fire Fable

At the end of May 2020, after the death of George Floyd, as people from across the country and world bore witness and broke open to the truth that racism and violence continue to inflict untold suffering and slaughter on black people in particular, Kaleb Sinclair, a black male Masters student and natural empath, training to be a psychotherapist, sent an anguished, grief-filled cry and

lamentation to his friends, family, teachers, and colleagues asking everyone to inhabit the experience of those who were slain from the Middle Passage to George Floyd. He used the first-person to aid the imagining and understanding of “what if this was me?” and “what if this had happened to me?” and ultimately, “what if this happened to my child?”. The response from this therapeutic community was manifold and far reaching, especially for me, Claire LeBeau, as a white woman and a professor who has been continuously taught by my students. Over the course of the last year, we extended our conversations from Levinas and Martin Luther King, Jr. to the call to engagement and ethical enactment in response to his appeal to enter into painful and honest dialogue. From this dialogue, Kaleb wrote the following vision, inspired by his and our collective grief and anguish, of *what if* Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech from the March on Washington in 1963, *had come from an actual dream*. What would the dream have been? What might the “irrecoverable, pre-ontological past” (Levinas, 1981/1998, p. 78) or the “true life” have looked like? What could we be again by allowing suffering to speak? The following is what Kaleb wrote in response.

In the wake of 2020’s racial violence, it is clear that the philosophies of Martin Luther King Jr., Emmanuel Levinas, and Gandhi, have yet to be realized in the eyes of world. These generational visionaries carry forward the echoes of ancient knowledge forged by the First Peoples, a currently imperceptible faith in humankind, a spiritual pedagogy of being-for. It is this faith, a faith in humanity’s true form, that beckons to the courageous to dream of a world beyond objectification and reduction. A deeper knowing of what once was sustains the sacrificial investment from the few into the hearts and souls of those who feel lost. Truth and memory will illuminate the resurgent possibility of the Beloved Community through pathways of communal acknowledg-

ment of suffering and vulnerability. Humanity's core remains, the call is not lost, passed down through dream and fable, unconscious yet conscious, stirring the hearts of enough of those who can bring about a revolution of the soul. I recall a dream, an ancient memory of love, older than thought or language, a dream of sleeping and awakening.

In the ancient days dating back to Pangaea, we lived or rather we survived as one organism. Living and breathing the same air, hunting and gathering as a collective because we did not want for anything more than each other. We empathized with one another because we were each other. If I was cold during the night, that meant that you were also cold, and so we would make a fire together. We empathized with each other (we were one being) and together we created solutions for each other. As the world grew, so did humankind; we distanced ourselves from one another physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Over time, we became disconnected as a people, we began to speak different languages, worship different gods, partaking in diverse rituals, and physically moved away from one another. With disassociation and distance, my needs changed; my life became less about community and more about self. The empathic connection that once moved between us at the beginning of time had faded; I no longer could sense the communal cold and identify what you needed because you became my neighbor. My physical and neurological connection to you had shifted, even my language to describe our relationship had altered and our alienated identities drove us apart. Empathy became a forgotten parable, and the word sympathy was conceived to take its place. I no longer suffered with you, rather, I saw you in anguish from a window or from my own fire. Now, one fire has become two and this is where we are today. My ability to empathize has diminished (or so I believe), through the acquisition of my own fire. I

am warm; unconcerned whether you are warm, I need not worry. Although I see you in the cold, I have the ability and privilege to choose whether to leave my comforting fire to join you and attempt to start a communal fire in the cold.

In days long past, when we could not start a fire, we huddled together for warmth, waiting out the long cold night together. I was close enough in proximity to you to feel the numbing chill begin to take you. I fought it with my own bodily warmth because if you died, I suffered and died along with you. Those days are gone, I have my own fire and I am warm; a privilege I possess now, for you are at a distance and I do not have to suffer with you like I once did. I cannot feel the cold creep onto your skin like I used to unless I draw closer, unless I allow empathy into my heart, unless I risk myself and my comforts. But that is uncomfortable now, for remembering puts me at risk of feeling something I may not like. I have forgotten that empathy is forged through proximity.

But let us imagine for a moment and let us recall our past into the present day. Let us explore a scenario where I do turn and the memories of the old ways of empathy reemerge from the recesses of my heart, creating enough energy to spark responsibility and curiosity. I come out from my fire and once again feel the communal cold of the long night that fights to take your life. What happens when I respond to the call of the Other?

I attempt to ignite a fire with you on the coldest night, I remember that you are my kin and I vow to die or survive with you. Once again, I feel the night's chill creep on to your skin, I hear your labored breathing and you hear mine as we toil together for your survival. We empathize, connected by proximity where privilege cannot enter. We fight the cold together, our muscles ache and our skin cracks in the frozen stiff air. I start to

forget my domicile, my fire, my privilege and what was only your fight for survival becomes mine. With our collective exertion we produce a spark, and our hope rises together. As it comes to rest, the tender spark ignites a withered, sunbaked sapling and once again, after such a long time, we communally see a light that warms and pierces the darkness. We labor on without surrender for, we must survive, for we are one and, if the spark goes out, we both shall perish. We take turns, you blow on the fire, giving life and taking warmth from your own body to help us survive and then I do. We sacrifice yet cling to life by each other's efforts. Empathy reemerges as if from a forgotten land and we realize amidst our toil that I am for you and you for me, we exist for one another. With each breath I offer to our fire; I begin to realize that we have been living our lives predicated on a lie of self-ascendance. We have never known the purpose of life, to truly be for one another, to breathe the same air, to grit our muscles, and experience the whip and lash conjured by the elements. We cannot turn back now, we continue to strive towards the realization that our world is a shared reality, not multiple dimensions unknown to one another, but a singularity. As we coalesce as one, our spark transfigures into a mighty flame of hope and upon its transformation, our unified mission has been reached. Hope has been forged in utter darkness and despair has been defeated. You and I will live through the coldest and longest night and our survival has been solidified by our unity. We celebrate and I observe your tears of joy and sorrow; you, who have for so long seemed foreign have now become familiar. I have shared in your struggle, witnessed the reality of your life that I am a part of tonight; I myself am moved to tears and we cry, laugh, and rejoice together, for you explain that every night a fire is lit, means another day to live, breathe, and exist, bonded by our proximal shared experiences.

I ponder what it truly means to live for another...

The moments of celebration last until that red dawn peeks over the horizon, the fire that provided warmth is now fading, as the red embers float into the sky, mixing with the horizon, painting a picture of unity and joint conquest of the struggle through the night. We sit silent, exhausted and triumphant, watching the illuminated sky celebrate our victory. We do not say a word, understanding one another in this moment, understanding that we are the same. Although we come from different places, we recognize and understand one another as we rediscover our humanity and we become unified by our communal struggle. We gaze up at the red dawn illuminating a world of possibilities in a glorious display, as if God himself painted the sky; its wonder and splendor appears different, changed, and daringly hopeful. We sit emboldened, holding onto hope for a better tomorrow and the strength to fight again when darkness falls, as it shall fall again.

But in the midst our hope as the red sky fades to orange, then is replaced by a luminous yellow, something curious and sinister occurs... The sun that shone prior to our long night together, has once again exposed our differences, blurring our deep ancestral ties, the thought occurs to me that perhaps we are nothing more than neighbors or distant strangers. As we recoil from one another, we experience separate feelings of guilt and shame for having drawn so close and for allowing the elements to bring us together. For I am nothing like you and you are nothing like me.

The uneasy feelings that creep from sharing space with those who are unknown, initiates a shiver that runs down our spines exacerbating into a tremble. Our entire bodies shake as if we are in danger, gifting a sick knot in our stomachs; exposed and uncomfortable under the beating sun, sweat beads down your brow and mine.

I notice that your clothes are in tatters and mine are not... You inhabit a realm, a forest beyond my land, which, most of the time I cannot perceive and at times, I intentionally close my eyes to. For your suffering pleads for my action, yet courage often fails me. We stand underneath the beating sun, exposed in our differences, “almost” erasing our memory of the struggle and unity over the long night. You recall the life of toil and hardship, the daily grind that you are exposed to; the systemic violence and beatings you undergo. This is not my life and it is here that I am left to ponder, what am I to do? I know the long night will come again. I know the elements will seek to destroy the Eden you and I have forged. What will I do when night falls? Do I forget you?

We have been titled "humanity", however, throughout history, we have lacked vision and have muted ourselves to the horrors that occur beyond our doorstep. To truly be human we must strive to regain our sight and recognize the call of the other.

This fable was written by someone who belongs to the forest. An individual who comes from the stance of the oppressed addressing my oppressors. I wrote this fable in the hope that one day its words would be heard and that those who have lived in privilege would come forward to witness the reality that I and a multitude of others are a part of...this is my greatest wish, for we are living in a world divided, where grief and despair are daily battles for countless citizens and the fire of hope is constantly at risk of being extinguished. The fire must prevail because empathy is forged through proximity. I humbly ask you, will you not dare to dream with me...?

Like Levinas, King and Sinclair, it is our turn now to imagine and dream of a future “true life” of the First Peoples, the First Law, that we perish or prevail together through the

long night only by allowing our light to be shared and transformed by and for the Other as first word, first priority, ethics as first philosophy, the interruption of love in the alchemy of the fire of the soul.

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