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News that Inspires

Polish Poet and Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska on How Our Certitudes K
by Maria Popova

“Attempt what is not certain. Certainty may or may not come later. It may then be a valuable delusion,” the great painter Richard Diebenkorn counseled in his ten rules for beginning creative projects. “One doesn’t arrive — in words or in art — by necessarily knowing where one is going,” the artist Ann Hamilton wrote a generation later in her magnificent meditation on the generative power of not-knowing. “In every work of art something appears that does not previously exist, and so, by default, you work from what you know to what you don’t know.”

What is true of art is even truer of life, for a human life is the greatest work of art there is. (In my own life, looking back on my ten most important learnings from the first ten years of Brain Pickings, I placed the practice of the small, mighty phrase “I don’t know” at the very top.) But to live with the untrammeled openendedness of such fertile not-knowing is no easy task in a world where certitudes are hoarded as the bargaining chips for status and achievement — a world bedeviled, as Rebecca Solnit memorably put it, by “a desire to make certain what is uncertain, to know what is unknowable, to turn the flight across the sky into the roast upon the plate.”

That difficult feat of insurgency is what the great Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska (July 2, 1923–February 1, 2012) explored in 1996 when she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for capturing the transcendent fragility of the human experience in masterpieces like “Life-While-You-Wait” and “Possibilities.”

In her acceptance speech, later included in Nobel Lectures: From the Literature Laureates, 1986 to 2006 (public library) — which also gave us the spectacular speech on the power of language Toni Morrison delivered after becoming the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize — Szymborska considers why artists are so reluctant to answer questions about what inspiration is and where it comes from:

It’s not that they’ve never known the blessing of this inner impulse. It’s just not easy to explain something to someone else that you don’t understand yourself.

Noting that she, too, tends to be rattled by the question, she offers her wieldiest answer:

Inspiration is not the exclusive privilege of poets or artists generally. There is, has been, and will always be a certain group of people whom inspiration visits. It’s made up of all those who’ve consciously chosen their calling and do their job with love and imagination. It may include doctors, teachers, gardeners — and I could list a hundred more professions. Their work becomes one continuous adventure as long as they manage to keep

discovering new challenges in it. Difficulties and setbacks never quell their curiosity. A swarm of new questions emerges from every problem they solve. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know."

Art by Salvador Dalí from a rare edition of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland

In a sentiment of chilling prescience today, as we witness tyrants drunk on certainty drain the world of its essential inspiration, Szymborska considers the destructive counterpoint to this generative not-knowing:

All sorts of torturers, dictators, fanatics, and demagogues struggling for power by way of a few loudly shouted slogans also enjoy their jobs, and they too perform their duties with inventive fervor. Well, yes, but they "know." They know, and whatever they know is enough for them once and for all. They don't want to find out about anything else, since that might diminish their arguments' force. And any knowledge that doesn't lead to new questions quickly dies out: it fails to maintain the temperature required for sustaining life. In the most extreme cases, cases well known from ancient and modern history, it even poses a lethal threat to society.

This is why I value that little phrase "I don't know" so highly. It's small, but it flies on mighty wings. It expands our lives to include the spaces within us as well as those outer expanses in which our tiny Earth hangs suspended. If Isaac Newton had never said to himself "I don't know," the apples in his little orchard might have dropped to the ground like hailstones and at best he would have stooped to pick them up and gobble them with gusto. Had my compatriot Marie Sklodowska-Curie never said to herself "I don't know", she probably would have wound up teaching chemistry at some private high school for young ladies from good families, and would have ended her days performing this otherwise perfectly respectable job. But she kept on saying "I don't know," and these words led her, not just once but twice, to Stockholm, where restless, questing spirits are occasionally rewarded with the Nobel Prize.

Such surrender to not-knowing, Szymborska argues as she steps out into the cosmic perspective, is the seedbed of our capacity for astonishment, which in turn gives meaning to our existence:

The world — whatever we might think when terrified by its vastness and our own impotence, or embittered by its indifference to individual suffering, of people, animals, and perhaps even plants, for why are we so sure that plants feel no pain; whatever we might think of its expanses pierced by the rays of stars surrounded by planets we've just begun to discover, planets already dead? still dead? we just don't know; whatever we might think of this measureless theater to which we've got reserved tickets, but tickets whose lifespan is laughably short, bounded as it is by two arbitrary dates; whatever else we might think of this world — it is astonishing.

But "astonishing" is an epithet concealing a logical trap. We're astonished, after all, by things that deviate from some well-known and universally acknowledged norm, from an obviousness we've grown accustomed to. Now the point is, there is no such obvious

world. Our astonishment exists per se and isn't based on comparison with something else.

Granted, in daily speech, where we don't stop to consider every word, we all use phrases like "the ordinary world," "ordinary life," "the ordinary course of events" … But in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone's existence in this world.

Twenty years before she received the Nobel Prize, Szymborska explored how our contracting compulsion for knowing can lead us astray in her sublime 1976 poem "Utopia," found in her Map: Collected and Last Poems (public library):

UTOPIA

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

Purely for the fun of it, I found myself drawing Szymborska’s poetic island in a map inspired by Thomas More’s Utopia:

Complement with astrophysicist Marcelo Gleiser on how to live with mystery in the age of knowledge, then revisit Szymborska on why we read, our cosmic solitude, how artists humanize our history, and the importance of being scared.