Storytelling & the Art of Tenderness
by Maria Popova

“I have always felt that a human being could only be saved by another human being,” James Baldwin observed as he offered his lifeline for the hour of despair. “I am aware that we do not save each other very often. But I am also aware that we save each other some of the time.”

When we do save each other, it is always with some version of the mightiest lifeline we humans are capable of weaving: tenderness — the best adaptation we have to our existential inheritance as “the fragile species.”

Like all orientations of the spirit, tenderness is a story we tell ourselves — about each other, about the world, about our place in it and our power in it. Like all narratives, the strength of our tenderness reflects the strength and sensitivity of our storytelling.

That is what the Polish psychologist turned poet and novelist Olga Tokarczuk explores in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech.

Olga Tokarczuk by Harald Krichel

Tokarczuk recounts a moment from her early childhood that deeply moved her: Her mother, inverting Montaigne’s notion that “to lament that we shall not be alive a hundred years hence, is the same folly as to be sorry we were not alive a hundred years ago,” told her small daughter that she missed her even before she was born — an astonishing gesture of love so total that it bends the arrow of time. Across the abyss of a lifetime, along the arrow of time that eventually shot through her mother’s life, Tokarczuk reflects:

A young woman who was never religious — my mother — gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world’s greatest tender narrator.

Our present bind, Tokarczuk observes, is that the old narratives about who we are and how the world works are untender and clearly broken, but we are yet to find tender new ones to take their place. Observing that in our sensemaking cosmogony “the world is made of words” yet “we lack the language, we lack the points of view, the metaphors, the myths and new fables,” she laments the tyranny of selfing that has taken their place:

We live in a reality of polyphonic first-person narratives, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise. What I mean by first-person is the kind of tale that narrowly orbits

the self of a teller who more or less directly just writes about herself and through herself. We have determined that this type of individualized point of view, this voice from the self, is the most natural, human and honest, even if it does abstain from a broader perspective. Narrating in the first person, so conceived, is weaving an absolutely unique pattern, the only one of its kind; it is having a sense of autonomy as an individual, being aware of yourself and your fate. Yet it also means building an opposition between the self and the world, and that opposition can be alienating at times.

This optics of the self, the way in which the individual becomes "subjective center of the world," is the defining feature of this most recent chapter of the history of our species. And yet everything around us reveals its illusory nature, for as the great naturalist John Muir observed, "when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."

Art by Arthur Rackham from Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens. (Available as a print.)

With an eye to her lifelong fascination with "the systems of mutual connections and influences of which we are generally unaware, but which we discover by chance, as surprising coincidences or convergences of fate, all those bridges, nuts, bolts, welded joints and connectors" — the subject of her Nobel-winning compatriot Wisława Szymborska's poem "Love at First Sight" — Tokarczuk reflects on our creativity not as some separate and abstract faculty but as a fractal of the living universe:

We are all — people, plants, animals, and objects — immersed in a single space, which is ruled by the laws of physics. This common space has its shape, and within it the laws of physics sculpt an infinite number of forms that are incessantly linked to one another. Our cardiovascular system is like the system of a river basin, the structure of a leaf is like a human transport system, the motion of the galaxies is like the whirl of water flowing down our washbasins. Societies develop in a similar way to colonies of bacteria. The micro and macro scale show an endless system of similarities.

Our speech, thinking and creativity are not something abstract, removed from the world, but a continuation on another level of its endless processes of transformation.

We sever this dazzling indivisibility whenever we contract into what she calls "the uncommunicative prison of one's own self" — something magnified in all the compulsive sharing on so-called social media with their basic paradigm of selfing masquerading as connection. Instead, she invites us to look "ex-centrically" and imagine a different story — one tasked with "revealing a greater range of reality and showing the mutual connections." Amid a world riven by "a multitude of stories that are incompatible with one another or even openly hostile toward each other, mutually antagonizing," accelerated by techno-capitalist media systems that prey on the greatest vulnerabilities of human nature, Tokarczuk reminds us that literature is also an invaluable tool of empathy — an antidote to the divisiveness so mercilessly exploited by our "social" media:

Literature is one of the few spheres that try to keep us close to the hard facts of the world, because by its very nature it is always psychological, because it focuses on the

internal reasoning and motives of the characters, reveals their otherwise inaccessible experience to another person, or simply provokes the reader into a psychological interpretation of their conduct. Only literature is capable of letting us go deep into the life of another being, understand their reasons, share their emotions and experience their fate.

Century-old art by the adolescent Virginia Frances Sterrett. (Available as a print and stationery cards.)

She calls for something beyond empathy, something achingly missing from our harsh culture of dueling gotchas — a literature of tenderness:

Tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed.

Echoing Iris Murdoch's unforgettable definition of love as "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real," Tokarczuk adds:

Tenderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it. It has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime, or prompt envy.

It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our "self."

Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate. Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself.

Literature is built on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves.

Complement with Ursula K. Le Guin on storytelling as a force of redemption, then revisit Toni Morrison's superb Nobel Prize acceptance speech about the power of language.