

ILLUSTRATION BY JON WILLIAMS

Radicalism of imagination

Although Ursula K. LeGuin has left us, her essays validate that her acuity, wit and perception are eternal

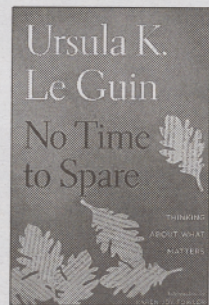
BY MIKE WOLD
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In your spare time, what do you do? That question on a survey elicited this response from writer Ursula K. LeGuin at age 81: "I ... don't know what spare time is because all my time is occupied. ... It's occupied by living."

LeGuin died earlier this year at the age of 88. The daughter of a famous anthropologist, she wrote what might be called anthropological science fiction — exploring in her adult novels how gender in particular and politics in general might be realized in different societies. In her fantasy young-adult books, the theme was often how one appropriately uses the talents one has, magical or otherwise. A well-loved children's series, "Catwings," tells how a family of winged street cats meet danger and difficulty while taking care of each other.

LeGuin's death gives weight the publication of a collection of essays under the title, "No Time To Spare: Thinking About What Matters," she selected from a blog she kept over her last few years. Never one to get too serious about herself, the subjects in "No Time to Spare" range from the literary to the philosophical to the personal, including her adventures with a new cat and the proper way to eat soft-

boiled eggs.



No Time To Spare: Thinking About What Matters, a collection of essays by Ursula K. LeGuin. Published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

subversive statement ... gnawing at the very foundation of the belief that things have to be the way they are."

"Utopiyan, Utopiyang" explores the reasons that utopia (and also dystopia) tends to manifest as "an enclave of maximum control surrounded by a wilderness." She characterizes these as

Some essays illuminate ideas behind her novels. In "It Doesn't Have to Be the Way It Is," LeGuin starts by pointing out that a successful fantasy has to be embedded in reality: "Fantasies can ignore certain laws of physics but not of causality." The grounding of fantasy in reality is what makes fundamentalists dislike fantasy, because it says "it doesn't have to be this way ... It is a

"yang" utopias or dystopias — "male, bright, dry, hard ..." and suggests that since authors only seem able to write dystopias these days, to write a utopia we need to think "yinly" — "acceptance of impermanence and imperfection, a patience with uncertainty and the makeshift, a friendship with water, darkness, and the earth."

Not coincidentally, LeGuin wrote two utopian novels. She says one, the post-apocalyptic "Always Coming Home," is an attempt at a "yin" utopia; she asks the reader if she succeeded! She doesn't say whether the other, "The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia" is more "yang," though it's clearly not about a perfect society, however, it's preferable to the capitalist society it's paired with.

One of LeGuin's greatest strengths was her ability to use her pragmatic but critical eye to point out the contradiction between the way things are and how they're talked about. In "Clinging Desperately to a Metaphor," she critiques our ideal of perpetual economic growth, saying that growth is a plausible metaphor only up to a point — for living things, growth beyond optimum size leads to obesity; for machines, weight and friction ruin efficiency when they get past an optimum size. She concludes that "Capitalist growth, probably for at least a century ... has been growth in the wrong sense ... Growth as in tumor. Growth as in cancer."

She has trenchant words about the "great American novel" as a male-oriented project: "I've never heard a woman writer say the phrase 'the great American novel' without a sort of snort." But in another essay she offers nominations: Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" and John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath." These are "two novels that to me are genuinely, immediately and permanently excellent. Call them great if you like the word. Certainly they are American to the bone." She writes that Steinbeck's book "makes me cry the way music can or tragedy can ... the tears that come of accepting as my own the grief there is in the world."

What the more personal essays lack in weight, they make up for in humor, a characteristic generosity of spirit and a profound respect for other forms of life, whether a cat playing with a live mouse, a Christmas tree placed so it can still perceive the sunlight, a declawed lynx on display in a zoo or a rattlesnake engaged in a staring contest. She writes, "A cat with a mouse — the cliché example of cruelty ... I do not believe any animal is capable of being cruel. Cruelty implies consciousness of another's pain and the intent to cause it. Cruelty is a human specialty ... though we seldom boast about it. We prefer to disown it, calling it 'inhumanity,' ascribing it to animals. We don't want to admit the innocence of the animals, which reveals our guilt."

It's unusual for a writer to combine hardheaded practical realism with a fantasist's willingness to question the way things are and pose against them the way things could be. LeGuin was no ideologue — but she brought the radicalism of her imagination to everything she wrote. That was her gift to us, and that is what will be missed now that she's gone.

Courtesy of Street Roots' sister paper, Real Change News in Seattle.

Like Water

by Mary Daniels

My life does not move like water;
does not flow, like water;
does not glide around bends
and rocks, like water;
does not rise and fall gently
with dips in the riverbed, like water;
is not just three atoms, like water
and maybe will never merge with
the oceanic immense, like water
when river meets the sea.

Life's Current

by Eileen Vizenor

My life as a body of water flows swiftly.
As a child, life was slower.
A trickle. A creek.
So fast at times, as I age.
A raging river that roars out to sea.
Stopping momentarily on a rock,
to ponder.
To breathe.
To look.
This river of life is my life.

Charting the Unknown

by Ron Sanford

Rivers are flowing all around us
Seen and unseen, physical
and metaphysical
Always changing course
Veins like tributaries find their source
from the heart, which is an ocean.
Synapses in the brain fuse to form an
Intricate network, much like a snowflake,
a fingerprint, or a work of art

Laughter is still
the best medicine we know
But hope deferred is like a sickness
to the heart and bones
Alone but not alone, I look to the West
There is a watershed waiting to welcome
the weary and brokenhearted
At least my thirst is quenched! I am free!
Gratitude ebbs as I return to the teem of
foamy white waters.
Glad to be back with the crew!
C'mon mates! Let us forge ahead!
We're charting the unknown once again.