

Two Visions

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The following is the speech I wrote for dawn at the 2019 Seattle Secular solstice. This version is somewhat longer than the version I read on stage. In terms of the ordering, the speech immediately came after the moment of darkness, as candles were being lit and passed around the audience.

There's something special about the fire, isn't there stardust?

The last element and the first technology, stolen by Trickster Gods and Animal Deities, the tool and provenance and birthright of humanity, and yet in itself sort of a living being, and not always entirely under our control.

On nights like these, for thousands of generations, our ancestors would huddle together around campfires to ward off winter's chill, eyes sparkling in the firelight as they told stories and imagined possible futures.

It is by the light of day which we live and breathe and love and hope, but it is at night that the stars come out.

The dark of night is a time of a mysteries and fears, imaginations and revelations, and winter nights are very long and dark indeed.

So tonight, by *our* firelight, in concert with the thousands of generations before us, I'd like to relate to you two visions I have had of the future of our species.

The first I beheld was....glorious, it was glorious.

I saw humanity spreading throughout the stars and across the galaxy, discovering new peoples and great riches in faraway constellations. I beheld wondrous monoliths whose fingers reached up to brush the very fabrics of the heavens.

And then I saw the vast cities among the stars. Great spires of titanium and steel, each more magnificent than the last.

The spires were filled with people of every shape and size and color and creed, in numbers and configurations beyond counting.

And there my vision ended, because it was not my future to live.

Because we haven't made it there yet, because we might not get that future, because if the world is at least half beautiful, then the world is also at least half terrible.

And I beheld another vision then, one of war, and pain, and death. One where we did not climb to the stars, but were stillborn in our earthly cradle, our ruins slowly crumbling and being erased by time. Will our generation be the last? Will we be the ones to end it all? I don't have the answer stardust, you tell me.

Science and technology have let us drag ourselves up out of the mud to build vast cities reaching fingers into the night. But, it has also brought us to a crossroads between utopia and extinction, the very tools of our salvation holding the possibility of our destruction.

Here we stand today, on the darkest day of the year, yet at the culmination of thousands of years of civilization.

So perhaps today, we should take some time to reflect on the lessons of the dark. Of community, togetherness, kindness and compassion in the face of a cold and uncaring universe.

You know, when I was a child, I had this energy, this belief that I really could do anything if I worked hard enough, that nothing would truly be out of reach. That didn't necessarily mean I always *did* work hard, but I believed that *if* I did, nothing would be withheld from me. I believed that the world was, at its core, fundamentally safe, fair, habitable. A place hospitable to human life.

I was hopeful for the future, both my own and the future of humanity in general. It seemed as if nothing could stop us, I didn't even need to do anything, the tides of history would simply win out and the energy of good would defeat that of evil, like had happened in every story I'd ever read. I could see the writing on the wall, and it said the good guys would win. That progress would continue forever and things would just keep improving.

But the world is not so habitable, and the future, so wrought with promise and potential is also run through with the promise of disaster and misfortune, of death and illness and misery. For every chance to strike it rich is a chance to end up destitute, for every chance to live, there is yet another chance to die. The world is at least half beautiful, the world is at least half terrible.

I've grown and broken and the world is not so habitable. Sometimes things don't work out. Sometimes the story ends in tragedy, sometimes the good guys lose. The world is beautiful, and it is also cruel and violent and bloody and heartless and broken, and full of places where when someone should have stepped in, when someone should have *done something*, there was no one there to do anything. There is no force ensuring that justice prevails, that the good guys win, that the tide of history will always sweep toward progress.

I've lost that youthful energy I once had, that belief that anything is possible if I simply try hard enough. I am forced to acknowledge the possibility of defeat, of failure, of death, of extinction. In the place of that youthful vigor is something more solemn, more

calm, and more at home, here, in the dark.

We can't save everyone, but we should keep trying anyway, in the hope of doing at least some good. Some people are beyond help, and yet we should be kind to them anyway, if for no one else's sake then for our own. There are lots of good reasons to give up and collapse in on ourselves, but there are also lots of reasons to keep trying in spite of it all.

Defeat is possible, sure, but we haven't lost yet, the game isn't over yet.

When the warm light of summer fades away, and we are left standing in the silence of winter's desolation, our hopes must be kept close and tempered with care. But still, hope remains, and if we but look can see that not everything about the dark and the night are bad and ill.

For me, the summers have always been something of a struggle, which has helped me to see the good in the winter's dark.

On one hand, the light is a source of nurturing warmth, but it can also be burning, blinding, scalding and destructive. On the other hand, the night can be cold, and bitter, and empty, but it can also be sheltering and comforting. The night protects us from summer's heat, the night gives us a cover to rest beneath, and the night lets us see the stars.

On one hand, we face the specter of an environmental collapse that we caused, dangerous technology which we have unlocked and mastered, and we are now closer than ever to destroying ourselves.

But on the other hand we finally are near to transcending our planetary cradle, to what many call the singularity, when we in one last sprint invent everything there is to invent and discover everything there is to discover, when the line on our progress goes effectively vertical.

Destruction or transcendence. Death, or life.

On one hand is our extinction, forever entombed on the planet of our birth.

On the other hand, above us, are the stars

~

Happy Solstice Stardust