STEF CRAPS
IDA MARIE OLSEN

Grief as a Doorway to Love: An Interview with Chris Jordan

The renowned American photographer, filmmaker, and artist Chris Jordan is no stranger to ecological grief. His stunning 2017 film *Albatross*, which tells the story of a gut-wrenching environmental tragedy that is unfolding on Midway Island in the Pacific Ocean, is steeped in it. Today Midway Island is part of the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, but it was formerly a Navy base and still carries traces of its military history through abandoned buildings and infrastructure. Midway is home to a myriad of different animal species, including a large colony of Laysan albatrosses that serves as the focus of Jordan's film. Through a mixture of photographs and video footage, the film depicts in intimate detail the albatross life cycle and the birds' often fatal encounters with ocean plastic pollution.

The film's central image, which has become an icon of the Anthropocene, is Jordan's photograph of an albatross carcass decaying on the ground, its stomach filled with plastic. In *Albatross*, this photo is surrounded by mandala patterns that become superimposed on the screen, indelibly combining beauty and horror as the film's journey begins. While the results of runaway consumerism remain an uncomfortable presence throughout the film, Jordan also focuses on capturing the non-human perspective, exploring intimately the experience of what it might be like to be an albatross. In this way, the film is closer to a work of art than to a nature documentary, taking the viewer on a powerful emotional and empathetic journey between grief and love, sorrow and joy, despair and hope.

The desire to shock and amaze his audience into increased environmental awareness is a driving force behind all of Jordan's work. The photographic series *Running the Numbers* (2006-present) and *Running the Numbers II* (2009-present), per-

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haps his best-known work until the release of *Albatross*, are a visual presentation of the incomprehensible statistics of mass consumption. Using materials such as waste, plastic bottles, and other everyday consumer items, Jordan digitally reworks the images and assembles them from thousands of smaller photographs. The photographic series *In Katrina's Wake: Portraits of Loss from an Unnatural Disaster* (2005), for its part, displays the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina through photographs of damaged everyday artifacts following the storm's devastation.

In the interview below, which was conducted via Skype and email, Jordan elaborates on his efforts to instill a sense of environmental awareness through his art projects. *Albatross*, he explains, is an artistic intervention in a broader environmental conversation that he perceives as broken in its focus on quick-fix, "heroin shot" solutions. Allowing ourselves to feel grief, in Jordan's view, is a transformative experience that opens up doorways into environmental consciousness and reconnects us with our instinctive love for the natural world. Grief and empathy were powerful undercurrents in Jordan's own experience on Midway during the shooting of the film, which he recounts in this interview. Other topics discussed include the problem of ocean plastic pollution, the relation between art and activism, the drawbacks of apocalyptic environmental messaging, and the meaning of biodiversity loss.

Q. *Albatross* continues a theme that is central to your previous work. In your series of altered photographs and montages *Running the Numbers II*, for example, you explore the environmental impact of human activities by visually representing statistics about mass consumption. In works such as "Gyre" (2009), which imitates Hokusai's famous wave using 2.4 million pieces of plastic, and "Whale" (2011), a picture of a whale constructed from 50,000 plastic bags, you create deceptively beautiful images by repeating familiar consumer items and waste. The result of ocean plastic pollution is what you depict in *Albatross*. How did you first become interested in this topic?

A. I've been interested for a long time in trying to depict these mass phenomena that are otherwise impossible to photograph. This is one thing that is so interesting about consumerism:

there is nowhere we can go and see the scale of it directly; we can't experience the enormity of it with any of our senses, because it is spread out in many different forms all over the globe. The only information we have available to us, to try to comprehend these vast phenomena, is statistics, which are abstract and inherently incomprehensible to us because the huge numbers are far beyond our ability to comprehend. The *Running the Numbers* series was about trying to visualize these phenomena in a way that at least points in the direction of comprehending their scale.

In 2008, I learned about the issue of ocean plastic pollution. I started talking to scientists about it, and I quickly learned that there is no "Great Pacific Garbage Patch" the way the public thinks about it. There is no floating island or continent of plastic in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that you can go and see, or scoop up, or photograph. There is plastic there, of course, but it is spread out into a kind of soup over millions of square miles of ocean. Plastic behaves in the ocean the way smoke behaves in the atmosphere, spreading out more or less evenly over time. And it doesn't all float right on the surface; it moves in the water column, and might be found five meters or 50 meters deep. It also is always breaking apart into smaller and smaller pieces, eventually getting so small that it is not visible to the naked eye. We know from scientific measurements that it is there, but we can't see it or photograph it at its actual scale.

I explored ocean plastic in my *Running the Numbers* series, but in that work I always felt a bit dissatisfied with the conceptual and emotional gap between my experience as one individual and the enormity of the global phenomenon. I always craved a way to relate to it on a more personal scale. When I learned from a biologist about the tragedy that's happening on this remote island in the Pacific, it immediately called to me to experience it in person. There is something about those little handfuls of plastic inside the birds that tells the whole global story in a visceral, intimate, close-up, individual way.

Q. In the film, you describe spending time on Midway as "being in paradise" because of the absence of natural predators, as a result of which there is an atmosphere of trust and peace among the birds. At the same time, we see the remains of de-

caying military infrastructure, which points in a very different direction. Can you describe Midway in more detail? What kind of place is it?

A. I did my college degree in literature and poetry, and this opened up for me the whole world of metaphor and its power to shift our internal landscape. Well-told stories are full of layers of symbolism and archetypal characters and themes that can serve as powerful mirrors that work below the level of conscious awareness. This was the first thing about Midway that astonished me; as soon as I heard about the tragedy that is happening there, it began to present itself in that same kind of layered symbolic way.

First, of all of the possible creatures that could be filled with plastic, it happens to be this legendary bird—the albatross—with a thousand-year history in our poetry and our literature as a sacrificial messenger, a harbinger of changing winds and shifting fortune. Albatrosses are not only a bird in the Pacific; they also play a potent archetypal role in the collective mind. And here they are on this island, a million of them in real life. It's like being inside an epic poem and also being in this astonishingly vivid real experience at the same time.

And of all the possible pollutants to find in their bellies, plastic is iconic on so many levels as a symbol for our time. For me its defining characteristic is how long it lasts—it is the immortal substance, but in that immortality is the ultimate sterility. And we embrace that sterility, which says something about us; when you look at how we drink plastic-bottled water and wrap our food in it, you can come to see plastic as a desire for protection, an unconscious manifestation of our fear of death. Then if you consider what it is made of, petroleum, the disinterred fossil remains of our most distant ancestors, it stands as a symbol on another whole level.

The remoteness of Midway Island also carries another layer of meaning. Plastic-filled birds in that location carry a different meaning than if they were on an island a few miles off the coast of Bangladesh, or at a landfill near a big city. Midway is near the very middle of the world's largest ocean, the Pacific—the great ocean of peace—the furthest you can get from a continent anywhere on Earth.

Another layer is the name of the island. Of all of the names this island could have—it could be Coconut Atoll, or named after some random admiral—the name "Midway" is iconic, like a whole poem, a whole philosophy of life in one word. The idea of standing "mid-way" between opposing elements, holding opposites in balance, goes back thousands of years in wisdom teachings, and it became a central theme of the project. I didn't say it explicitly in the film, but the mid-way notion ties everything together. In *Albatross*, we stand between paradise and hell, between horror and beauty, between the past and the future; caught between our innate love for the living world and the tragedy of our destruction of it. And visually the cinematography holds the mid-way theme as well, with horizons cutting directly across the center, subjects placed in the middle of the frame. I happen to be a Libra, and I love the idea of the balanced scales, held in symmetry.

And being on that island served as a kind of mid-way point in my own journey. For many years as an artist, I'd been looking intently into the darkness and at the bad news. A lot of environmentalists make that their focus: we know we can't turn away from the bad news, and yet, this singular attention on the bad news can be depressing and make us feel hopeless, overwhelmed, and paralyzed. There was something about being on that island that reminded me that the bad news is not the whole story. Yes, we still have to look at the darkness, fully face it; but now I believe more in holding these things in balance: hold all of the bad news and at the same time remember the miracle that we're all a part of in every moment, the majesty and beauty of the world we have been gifted.

Q. In the film, we hear you say that you "believe in facing the dark realities of our time." Also, in a recent *HuffPost* article that you wrote (Jordan, 2018), you reflect on grief and despair, asking, "Can despair be held and contained as a natural human experience alongside fear, anger, rage, grief, joy, beauty and love? Or does it somehow diminish or cancel out everything else?" You go on to speculate that "[p]erhaps there is something empowering and transformative that comes from standing in despair's crucible," and state that you "want to know what happens if we take the risk of looking all the way into that darkness."

You seem to be saying that you believe in the capacity of grief and despair to prompt action when it comes to environmental issues. Yet, some would argue that these feelings are more likely to lead to denial, numbness, and avoidance—paralysis rather than action. We often hear that a more productive way of dealing with environmental issues is to focus on positive reinforcement, stressing hope and the possibility of creating a better future. How do you respond to that argument? How do we avoid feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed, rather than galvanized, by grief and despair?

A. I think that what is paralyzing, overwhelming, and constricting is not the feeling of despair and grief; it is our *resistance* to feeling those things. Despair and grief are natural feelings that move through us when we live in a state of flow. If we honestly look out at our world, we can't help but feel those feelings; the question is, how do we relate to them? I learn a lot about this from my dog Rilke, who doesn't even have the capacity to get stuck in a feeling. When he's scared or sad or feels sorry, it's like a wave that goes through him, there's some barking or crying or other expression, and then he's on the other side in the blink of an eye. This is one of the things I learned on Midway from being with the dying birds. I had the experience hundreds of times, so close that I could touch them, as they died from starvation or toxicity with their stomachs full of plastic, or choked to death trying to cough it out. It was like the film *Groundhog Day*, I had the same experience over and over again, and my relationship to it began to change over time, especially my experience of grief.

I used to live in fear of grief; I thought it was a bad feeling, to be avoided, and I think collectively we are highly grief averse. We fear that if we really feel our sadness for all that is being lost in our world, fully surrender to it, it will last forever and we will be sad and full of despair for the rest of our lives. So we resist feeling our sadness, we split off from that part of ourselves that feels it, and we get stuck in a cycle of resistance. But when we actually *feel* those things, surrender to the feeling, then it moves through fast, like a storm passing across an island. You see it coming, and then the tears pour down, and it moves on through. And on the other side is almost always clarity and joy.

My experience of grief came as this astonishing revelation over hundreds of individual experiences with the dying birds. Slowly I began to let go of the judgment that it is a bad experience; I began to observe what was actually going on, and wondered why I was moved so deeply at the deaths of these birds that I had never thought about for my whole life up until then. One thing I noticed was that time seemed to slow down, and the colors were astonishingly bright and clear. Being with each dying bird was a vivid experience of being alive and in spiritual contact with another being. And every time, the tears poured down again. Finally, it dawned on me that the reason I feel so much for them is because I love them. And the true nature of grief was revealed, like the Wizard of Oz coming out from behind the curtain: I saw that grief is not the same as sadness or despair, it is the same as love. It is not a bad feeling, it is not a dark energy; it is an expression of our love for other beings who are suffering, or whom we are losing. In that way, opening to grief can serve as a powerful doorway that leads us to our deepest essence.

Q. We'd like to pick up on that idea. You say in the film that you came to Midway "as a witness" and that you believe in the power of witnessing. Indeed, in the act of witnessing, you say, "a doorway opens." You use the same image in your *HuffPost* piece (Jordan, 2018), where you talk about embracing despair as "a liberating doorway we can step through toward the healing of our relationship with each other and the world." Could you elaborate on that? How do you envision the future?

A. Witnessing, for me, is about maintaining our presence when we are with another being who is suffering, and we cannot do anything to help them. That was an incredibly important piece of the story of Midway: there was nothing I could do for the birds. It is impossible to remove the plastic from their bellies, or do anything else to save them in that moment. It puts us in a state of complete helplessness. As they let go of life, the only thing there is left to do is to stay there, in that crucible, and *not turn away*. I found that to be transformational, and that experience became a central theme of *Albatross*.

I think the experience of witnessing can help elevate the environmental movement out of some of its disempowered

conversations, and that is one of the things my film is aimed at breaking through. Here is one of those traps I think we are caught in at the moment; we have all heard this speech about "solutions" in a hundred different forms: "Here is a catastrophically terrifying, apocalyptically huge, overwhelmingly complex environmental problem that we should all be panicking about; and the solution is: each person should make infinitesimally tiny changes in their personal behavior, such as changing your light bulbs or not using plastic straws." That whole paradigm is broken and damaging to the psyche on so many levels that I could write a book about it.

And lately it has gotten even worse: everybody is sick of hearing about the problems, so the focus now is only on "solutions." Not complex global solutions involving the takedown of capitalism and renewed spiritual connection with life, but "solutions" limited to individual behavioral gestures that everyone knows don't address the scale of the problems by even an order of magnitude. On one hand, of course those small behavior changes are important to do and talk about; and in another way, if that is *all* we do or talk about, it is a hopelessly inadequate response to the problems of our world. The underlying belief is that "small behaviors lead to bigger change," but I have a question in my mind whether that is actually true. And it may even go the other way: small individual behavior changes may tend to pacify our feelings and enable us to sink further into denial about the bigger issues. I think this whole approach might be disempowering and counter-productive to actual change, especially in the tragic way it places the overwhelming burden of solving global issues on the individual shoulders of young people.

But there is another way to look at it. All of those problems "out there" in the physical world—not only environmental problems, but social justice issues as well—can be seen as symptoms of a deeper problem that is not "out there"; it is *in here*, in our mind, in our culture, in the morphic field of collective consciousness. That is the origin of all of the world's problems, and it is where the real solutions can be born as well. But it requires looking in uncomfortable places; here is one small example.

At virtually every talk I ever give, somebody raises their hand at the end and asks, "So what's one thing I can do?" On the surface that appears to be a legit question, and if we stay on that channel, we could talk about action items and lists of individual solutions, and convince ourselves that we are accomplishing something. But when you slow down a bit and look more carefully, something interesting happens: a whole set of emotional mechanisms becomes visible that are invisibly running the show behind the scenes, below the level of conscious awareness.

When somebody asks, "What's one thing I can do?," if they could become one level more aware, they might see that immediately before they asked that question, they were feeling something: perhaps a pang of fear of some kind, which caused their heart to beat faster, and that produced anxiety as they sat there. They didn't like that feeling, and they unconsciously wanted it to go away, and that manifested as an impulse to raise their hand and ask for a little shot of heroin to calm them back down. In that moment, their unconscious mind is seeking a solution, not to the environmental problem being discussed, *but to their own feelings of discomfort.* They want to be told that if they make a tiny, easy, convenient personal behavior change, that will lead to big global changes, and everything will go back to being fine. So, in response to that kind of question, if that kind of solution is offered, then their anxiety goes away, and later on they won't even go out and implement that solution, however small or simple it was.

In this way, I think, the whole conversation about personal solutions can function as a collective trance induction, enabling us to stay in denial together, and avoid deeper responsibility for our collective effects on the world. And underneath all of that is a set of uncomfortable feelings that we continue enabling each other to avoid feeling. I think we are all stuck in that place together, and the sad paradox is that it is all about resistance to change, but what we are trying to protect is a kind of insane and disconnected existence that is not making us happy in the first place.

That is the doorway I want to step through: for us to drop down a few levels of self-awareness and get a lot more grown up

about what is going on. Not as an exercise in punishment or because it is the "right" thing to do, but because it is the path to recovering our joy and connectedness with life. Witnessing is the opposite of talking about solutions; it is an experience of deep presence in the absence of any solutions. It can be incredibly humbling, bringing us into contact with a lot of crucial internal material that otherwise can remain invisible for our whole lives. At the bottom of it is grief. If we can make it down through all of the other layers, and reach the level of our sadness for what is being lost, and really feel it, then the transformative doorway presents itself. That doorway opens us to love, the infinite ocean of love we each contain, the love we are made of. And we arrive home. That is something we can achieve collectively; we can literally step together into a new story of the world. And then we would be in a completely different space to talk about solutions.

Q. Some people have argued recently that focusing on the issue of plastic pollution actually invites precisely the kind of quick-fix problem-solving response you describe, as plastic pollution—which can be addressed relatively easily—is a convenient truth, as distinct from the inconvenient truths of climate change and biodiversity loss, which are much more intractable. In his book *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life after Warming* (2019), the journalist David Wallace-Wells dismisses what he calls "plastic panic" as "a climate red herring." He regrets that it is receiving so much attention as, in his view, it distracts from a far graver and more pressing problem. Plastic pollution has "slid into the center of our vision," he writes, only to occlude "the much bigger and much broader climate threat" (see also Stafford & Jones, 2019). Do you think this is a fair critique? Back in 2005, you captured the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, America's first glimpse of a global warming-related disaster, in a series of photographs titled *In Katrina's Wake: Portraits of Loss from an Unnatural Disaster*. Did you have a different sense of urgency about that project?

A. I totally agree with Wallace-Wells about plastic panic. You can see why the plastic issue is so attractive, as we try to face, comprehend, and bear the enormous complexity of the world's problems. Plastic is a simple one: you can see it. With plastic

we're not talking about parts per million of an invisible gas in the atmosphere that's just all abstract statistics and science; you can see shards of plastic, you can see how it killed a bird or a sea turtle, and each person can also see their own plastic consumption in their own life. People say that a lot about my Midway photographs: "That could be *my* plastic bottle cap inside that bird." There is something personal and relatable about it. I think of plastic as low-hanging fruit, easy to grab, and in that way, it can serve as an "entry-level" activism issue that helps people become environmentally aware.

The danger is that it also can be an easy off-ramp to avoid facing more difficult stuff. If we get all obsessed about plastic, and focus on it to the exclusion of everything else we consume, then it can become a defense mechanism. Something is terribly wrong if we bring our reusable bags to the supermarket, and come out with those bags full of factory-farmed meat, unsustainably caught fish, GMO fruits and vegetables grown with pesticides and shipped from all over the world, a bottle of wine from 12,000 miles away, and so on, and drive home in our gas-guzzling SUV feeling satisfied that we did something good for the environment. In this way, I have come to see the obsessive focus on plastic as a seductive form of collective denial; like a drug we have all become addicted to together. Not that plastic isn't a problem, because of course it is; what I am advocating for is to look more closely at how that problem resides in the collective mind.

Since the beginning of ocean plastic activism, I have watched it turn into a massive industry that's gotten pretty grotesque at this point, with large-scale environmental organizations out there doing photo-ops in their matching t-shirts, branding their eco-products, and raising tons of money as career businesspeople while doing very little to actually solve the problem. And one invisible motivation those organizations have is to exaggerate the problem, to amplify public fear about it. If they can make ocean plastic seem really scary and bad, and make themselves appear to be heroes who are solving it, then everyone will buy their products and support them with donations. In that way, they can fall into the same trap as television news media: the more alarm you can inject into your message, the bigger your audience will become.

I remember feeling that seduction when I first went to Midway. The island has a protected harbor where the navy ships used to dock, and ocean plastic tends to float into that bay and get trapped in there. It all blows over to one corner of the harbor and collects into a raft of floating junk maybe half the size of a basketball court. If you photograph it up close, it looks really bad, until you zoom out and see it in better perspective. But that's the tendency with ocean plastic activism: photographers or filmmakers go to the most polluted place they can find, take the worst possible picture of it, and then offer that as a representation of the entire Pacific Ocean.

On Midway, I realized that if I used shots of that scene in my film, it wouldn't be honest and I wouldn't be making a documentary film. Because there I was, standing on an island looking out at millions of square miles of open ocean where you see very little plastic. So how does one honestly face a problem like ocean plastic pollution, and also assess its importance against issues like climate change and species extinction, without exaggerating in either direction? It's a challenge.

Without ever really asking that question, a whole generation of environmental activists has gone way down the road of alarmism, thinking it is the right way to motivate people. We put out messages of catastrophic destruction and apocalypse, and we all reflect it and amplify it between each other, thinking we are doing the right thing, without slowing down to look more closely at how it is affecting people. Every day I see another headline like, "How to Live Through the Apocalypse," "Summoning Our Courage for the Great Collapse," "Living in the End Times," or whatever. We're putting out this terrifying story that there is going to be a catastrophic moment of mass destruction, and most of life is going to end on Earth, and it is going to happen in our lifetime. Young people all over the world have been hearing that for their whole lives, and they took us at our word; they really believe that a world-ending apocalypse is coming, and they live in a permanent state of paralyzing terror and disempowerment. The truth is that the whole thing is a massive exaggeration that we have all joined in. We thought it was the right approach to raise environmental awareness, but its actual effect on the collective psyche is profoundly traumatizing.

It is time for the adult world—the cultural leaders, scientists, writers, and so on—to look more closely and ask ourselves if this story is working, the way a ship's captain looks at the compass and makes an adjustment to the course. I think the alarmist approach may be having precisely the opposite of the desired effect, like a badly designed PR campaign that not only failed to sell the product, but made most of the target audience *hate* the product. The environmental facts are what they are, but I think we can get more honest and sophisticated about our emotional relationship to those facts. There are feelings much more powerful and transformative than terror and shame that are available to join the collective story. The environmental movement can turn more toward the beauty of our world, to reconnect with our amazement and gratitude for the wondrous gift of life that we've each been given. It's an energy we can intentionally cultivate in all kinds of ways. Humanity can remember its capacity for love; we can connect with our love for the living world, collectively on a mass scale for the first time ever. Then we would all know how to act on a deep instinctive level that isn't available to us right now.

Q. What do you believe is the role of art in "facing the dark realities of our time," particularly our dire environmental predicament? In *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction*, which has a chapter on albatrosses that references your work, the environmental humanities scholar Thom van Dooren writes: "In this time of incredible loss of species, ... [w]e need stories that can reconnect people with the distant and ongoing impacts of their waste in a way that may make a difference for the future of generations of albatrosses and all those other species with whom they are entangled" (2014, p. 23). *Albatross*, which reveals how life is profoundly influenced by human activity even in one of the remotest and least inhabited places on Earth, seems to answer that call. What kind of difference do you think or hope it—and environmental art more generally—can make?

A. I think art has a central role to play in the healing of our world. It operates on different channels than other forms of conversation. It can reach down into deeper places and connect us with material that lives below the level of thoughts and

language. One example I love to point to is Picasso's role in anti-war activism. Think of all of the different kinds of anti-war activism out there, and then there is Picasso's *Guernica*. I went to the Reina Sofía museum in Madrid and stood in front of *Guernica* and just wept my eyes out with the power of it.

Much of public activism is about protesting, raising awareness, and telling people how to behave. When it is done in an unskilled or unconscious way, it can be infused with irony, hypocrisy, and disrespect. It can be one angry unconscious mind talking to another angry unconscious mind, amplifying negativity or enabling denial, or fostering fear and shame or even hatred that doesn't benefit anyone. There is way too much of that happening out there, and it can end up being unnecessarily divisive and counter-productive to the desired effect; kind of like parents who scream at their kids, thinking it will get them to behave.

Art can work on a different and more basic level, cutting across language and religion, connecting us to something universal, and making bridges between our apparent differences. It is less about judging or transferring facts and more about containing feeling, complexity, and paradox. It doesn't reduce or simplify or tell us how to behave. If you went to Picasso and asked him, "I saw *Guernica*, so what's one thing I can do?," you would probably be met with a loud laugh followed by a punch in the nose. Picasso's art respects its audience, respects their sovereignty and intelligence, challenges them with layers of meaning, symbolism, and beauty, inviting them to rise to a higher level of consciousness. I think he would say that how they behave after seeing his work is completely up to them; he would never hand out a list of action items along with his paintings. Looked at in that light, those lists of action items seem kind of ridiculous to me.

Q. We would like to push you a little on this opposition between art and activism, and your critique of some kinds of activism. How do you feel about environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Dark Mountain, which reject the optimistic outlook of the mainstream environmental movement and embrace the importance of grieving for the losses humanity has already endured as well as those still ahead? Your work

seems to resonate with these ideas. Don't you regard them as kindred spirits in any way?

A. I'm glad you ask, because that's really important. I don't want to give the impression that I'm down on activism. I am definitely down on unconscious fear-mongering and shaming and doomsday messaging, because I think that approach is having precisely the opposite of the intended effect. But skillful and passionate activism is incredibly important and has been making a major difference in the world for a very long time. I have massive respect for Extinction Rebellion, and most of my best friends are activists of one kind or another. All of the people who are out cleaning up beaches, rescuing birds, keeping the heat on legislators, writing about environmental grief—there are a million ways to do it, and those guys are the warriors in the trenches, and they are my heroes. I'm just standing back from a different perspective, like the ship's co-pilot who glanced at the compass, and am just saying, "We need to turn the ship." As an artist, I'm trying to apply the power of art to the collective mind like a kind of aikido move. There is a way that art can come in from a different angle and shift energy and story on a basic level.

I also don't want to give the impression that I am advocating for living in denial of the facts. When I say that I am against alarmism, what I am advocating for is not backing off and chilling out and ignoring the problems. Right now, it is more important than ever to fully and courageously face the realities of our world. What I don't want to do, though, is to take the facts, and spin them with amplified darkness and unconscious terror and shame, and pretend that is still the facts. Right now, I think, we are doing that, not out of any bad intention; it is just a habit we got into without realizing it. Now it is time to step back and assess, to look honestly at the effect it is having. I think doomsday activism has induced trauma in millions of people, and that emotional state does not lead to positive change. It may even be playing a role in the red wave of far-right political extremism that is moving across the world right now. That phenomenon clearly is powered by unconscious fear, and some of that fear—maybe even a lot of it—may be the result of a few decades of unmediated environmental alarm-

ism. That's a sobering thought, and pretty hard to face up to, like a parent who realizes they have been abusing their child. But it's not about blaming anyone; it is about waking up and seeing more clearly where we are, and starting to make new and more conscious decisions about the energy and stories we want to animate into the world.

I believe that to achieve deep change, on the scale of the problems, we have to drop down to another level. At its heart I believe the crisis that we are in is a spiritual one. We are in danger of losing contact with something really fundamental: our wonderment, our joy, our love for the world, our love for each other and for the great miracle we are all part of. We can make a priority of turning back in that direction, and change would accelerate on all kinds of levels really fast. Art can play a role there, maybe even a defining one.

Q. In his essay "The Dark Ecology of Elegy," the environmental philosopher Timothy Morton writes: "Traditionally, elegies weep for that which has already passed. Ecological elegy weeps for that which will have passed given a continuation of the current state of affairs" (2010, p. 254). Would you agree that "ecological elegy" is an apt label for *Albatross*, which strikes us as a work of anticipatory mourning, grieving ongoing as well as future losses in the hope of averting them?

A. Yes, it's definitely an elegy for what has already been lost; and I love the question because it points to another piece of the environmental conversation that I think needs some tweaking. There is a subtle and dangerous thread going on in the collective story, which is the assumption that everything is already decided, we are going to continue behaving the way we are, and a dark future is unavoidable. When you start looking for that assumption, you can see it everywhere in people's words and thoughts. Language can be subtle that way, and also incredibly powerful. I think maybe some people even unconsciously enjoy making harsh statements that everything is going to hell in a hand basket, and crushing the hope of others as being too naive.

But we have to acknowledge that the future is not decided. Individually and collectively we could change in unimaginably radical ways tomorrow morning if we wanted to. So let's ask

what would foster such change. And then let's do whatever that is. It could even happen spontaneously, as it did on a national scale when I was in Chile recently. Their whole culture erupted into revolution without anyone deciding it; and the day before it happened, no one could have predicted it. There is nothing standing in the way of radical awakening of consciousness and all of the systemic change that would follow. And that's what makes me hopeful: big, complex problems in the physical world seem scary and hard to solve, but collective consciousness can change in the blink of an eye. We all live in an invisible matrix of feelings and stories and attitudes and beliefs, and when that shifts, the whole world shifts. And it isn't something that needs to start from scratch; it is already happening, thanks to the visionary work of those who have devoted their lives to these issues before us. There is a great transformative wave of awakening moving across the world and inside each of our hearts; right now, it just needs more well-placed nudges to encourage it along. That is what *Albatross* and all of my work is aimed at contributing to.

So *Albatross* is an elegy, but not a grieving-into-the-future film. The future is not written, and how deeply and courageously we can approach the present will define the future in ways we can't even imagine. I intend *Albatross* as a medicine ceremony, a journey home to re-awaken something sacred that lives inside all of us right now.

It feels so important to realize that there is no looming apocalypse that requires our immediate panic-level attention this minute. We have time to slow down and gather ourselves, summon our wisdom, and reconnect with what our hearts feel. There is time to grieve what is being lost; and on an even deeper level, to feel our connection with what is still here: the incredible beauty and miracle that surrounds us all in every moment, to feel our love for it all. False urgency tends to strip us of that capacity, and make it feel irrelevant, when in fact slowing down and reconnecting with what is in our hearts may be the most important and transformative thing we can do.

Q. An element that is repeated a lot in the film is the mandala pattern. We see you decorate albatross bodies in a kind of mourning ritual or ceremony, making circles of yellow flowers

around them, and then these patterns become superimposed on the screen. What was the idea behind this?

A. I wanted *Albatross* to be a documentary film, and early on I realized that if I followed the standard factual informational formula, then it would only be a very narrow slice of what I was actually experiencing on the island. A major part of the experience of Midway for me was deeply emotional and spiritual and infused with layers of poetry and beauty and mystery. That didn't feel like it was coming from me; it was an integral part of the reality of that place. So I decided to bring in all of those elements as essential parts of a kind of holistic documentary film. Mandalas played a role in that.

I love mandalas; I have a whole collection of them that I have been making for years. It's a little side thing I do, including sometimes working with programmers to create giant mandalas like my piece called "E Pluribus Unum" (2010). There is something about them; they represent so much: an abstract reference to beauty, but perfected geometrically, like the cosmic math equation that runs the universe. They point to the interconnected web of life, Indra's net, the compass rose, a spider web, sacred symbols. They appear in many of the world's ancient spiritual traditions. And beyond words, there's just the sheer psychedelic delight of looking at circular patterns of such complexity and symmetry. I see mandalas, or visualize them, frequently in my everyday experience. I remember when I was composing my photo of that plastic-filled bird, the iconic image at the very beginning of *Albatross,* as I was looking through my camera, I saw it spin into a mandala. That's where the mandala in the film came from: I made it from that photograph. You can see the colors of the plastic and the shapes of the feathers if you look at it closely.

There is also something about the helplessness of being there after they die, the desire to make some sort of gesture to honor what just happened. So we made mandalas around the birds, using sticks or flowers or rocks or just our footprints in the sand. Usually we just started doing it spontaneously, without any plan or even any words at all. Sometimes it was a circle shape, or other times in the shape of an egg around the bird, maybe like the egg it came from, a symbolic return

to the mother. We made a few hundred or so of those, maybe some of them are still there.

Q. One of the things that set *Albatross* apart from most other animal documentaries is that the filmmaker features heavily in it. You are not just an off-screen voice but also an embodied presence in the film: we see you pulling the plastic out of the albatross carcasses, and we see your emotional response. Could you talk about this decision to include yourself as a character in the film?

A. It felt important to bring myself in as a kind of guide, to carry the audience through the story instead of just dropping them off on the island. And I wanted to avoid the standard "voice of God" type of narration, where you never meet the narrator or have any relationship with that person. I knew I wanted to push pretty far into some challenging emotional material, and to do that I needed to be present in a personal way that might break some rules.

Defining my role in the film, and the tone and shape of the narration, was the most challenging part of making *Albatross*. In a way, it is the most important piece, which sets the tone for everything else. I wanted to make it really intimate, as if I had brought the viewer alone to Midway to guide them on a private journey of witnessing and healing. I had an image in my mind that guided the writing: I imagined the viewer kneeling in the sand in front of a nest, just inches away from a baby that is hatching from its egg. The mother albatross is standing right there tending to her hatching chick, and I am kneeling behind the viewer's shoulder, out of their line of sight. As they watch, I just lean in and say quietly in their ear: "The parents know not to crack the egg open for the baby; but watch how they encourage it by singing to it." And then I step back and leave them to their own experience for a while.

I also knew my role had to be as minimal as possible, because I didn't want to make it a vicarious experience for the viewer, where the viewer was seeing me having my experience; I wanted to create a space where the viewer could have their own experience of being on the island, with me there only as a gentle guide, almost like a meditation teacher, who just steps

in, points out something to pay attention to, and then steps back out. I thought that showing my emotional response might help them find theirs, but it had to be subtle and understated so their focus could stay on their own experience.

Q. You already mentioned literature and your background as a student of literature. The albatross is a legendary bird, as you said earlier, largely thanks to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798). This connection is immediately made in the opening of *Albatross*, when we are shown a Gustave Doré illustration of an albatross and a quotation from Coleridge's poem: "He loved the bird, that loved the man / Who shot him with his bow." Even before the making of your film, then, there were feelings of guilt and grief connected to the albatross. Now that we are aware of the extent of the bird's suffering caused by our plastic pollution of the oceans, that guilt and grief become even stronger. It is almost as if Coleridge anticipated what is happening on Midway. Is this why you chose to focus on the albatross rather than on other animal species that are also being affected severely?

A. I wouldn't say that I chose the albatross as a character; it was more like this poetic story presented itself and drew me toward it, and began to reveal itself in all of these layers. It emerged into my mind like a parable, but I didn't make up any aspect of the story; it is all real, actually taking place out there on this acupuncture point on the globe. One of those layers is the parallel with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which was omnipresent in the experience out there. I chose that line as the film's opening quote because it flips the narrator's point of view back on itself twice—first we are the man referencing the bird, then we become the bird referencing the man, and then we again become the man who shoots the bird. So right off the bat we are in a state of empathy, one consciousness looking out through the eyes of different beings. That is a primary theme throughout: shifting perspective, slowing down time, turning the world inside out, looking through the eyes of the other, becoming the other. The albatross serves as sacrificial figure and savior, but not in the Christian sense: in "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," the moment when the mariner's soul is saved

is when he reconnects with the beauty of the living world and "blesses it unaware." Coleridge was tapping into something incredibly powerful there, and it was amazing to feel connected to that same thread.

Q. Albatrosses can be described as charismatic megafauna: popular animal species that are large, cute, cuddly, recognizable, symbolic, and/or mythical. These animals, also known as flagship species, are easier to empathize with and to grieve than other creatures such as endangered insects, plants, or microorganisms. That's why the former are often used in environmental campaigns, even though the latter may be in even graver danger of dying out. Indeed, a global scientific review recently found that the world's insects are being driven to extinction at an alarming pace: "The rate of insect extinction is eight times faster than that of mammals, birds and reptiles. The total mass of insects is falling by a precipitous 2.5% a year, according to the best data available, suggesting they could vanish within a century" (Carrington, 2019). In the film, you state: "I didn't know I could care about an albatross." Can we also learn to care about these other creatures, to extend our empathy to creatures that aren't as charismatic? The tagline of *Albatross* is: "A love story for our time from the heart of the Pacific." Do you think it would be possible to create love stories that feature non-charismatic creatures? Does affect alone provide an adequate basis for environmental concern, or does environmental art need to tap into the intellect as well as—or even instead of—the emotions in some (or maybe even all) cases?

A. I had several experiences on the island that really opened me to this question. One of them was the most powerful experience of the entire expedition, of the whole project, for me. It was the moment—it's not in the film because it was just too raw—when I accidentally killed a baby albatross myself. I ran over a baby albatross in its nest with my bike one day. It was during the hatching season, and everyone on the island has to move in slow motion during that time because there are so many nests with babies everywhere on the ground. For just a moment, I wasn't paying attention, I was riding my bike, looking off to the side, and I felt a bump. I looked down, and I had

just run over a baby in its nest. I jumped off and looked and saw that its wings and legs were broken, and it was coughing up some orange liquid. It didn't die right away, it took three days for it to die, and I went and visited it every morning and evening. When it finally died, I was completely beside myself. Knowing the birds as I did, I realized how much I had taken from this little being: it would never get to see the ocean, or take off and zoom across the waves, or return to the island to do its mating dance, or find its mate and hatch its own babies. I had taken everything from it, the whole universe. And whatever lineage of offspring might have sprung from that life, all of those future lives, were also cut off in that instant. When I returned to the nest on the third day and found it dead, I was unconsolable; I think it was the hardest I've cried in 25 years, maybe ever. I couldn't believe how much feeling I had for this one little bird.

We did a ceremony around it, and then there was a transformational moment, when we walked out of the forest back into the field of hundreds of thousands of birds. It came to me like a thunderbolt: I suddenly realized that there wasn't anything about that one baby bird that made it any more lovable than any of them. I realized that I had that much love inside of me for every single one of those individuals. That realization broke me open all over again; it was like my heart just overflowed.

And I remember at the end of trip eight, when leaving the island for the last time, I went and sat alone in the field among the birds one last time, and I asked them what they would want me to know about them that I hadn't realized yet. I heard a voice speak to me, a female voice, like in a dream. She told me: "We are not special. There is nothing about us that makes us any more beautiful or magnificent or lovable than any creature that walks or swims or flies in our world. You came to love us only because we let you see closely into our lives. But any creatures that you look this closely at, you will find you love them just as much." It hit me like a ton of bricks; I felt my heart open up all the way to the horizon. That's the day I connected with what my Buddhist friends call my "love for all beings." It was life-changing.

So yes, I believe it is possible to make a love story about any creature: even an insect, or pigeons under a bridge, rats in a sewer. If you could go see rats up really close, hear the noises they make, how they communicate, how they choose their mate and make their nest and snuggle in there, and care for their babies, I'm sure we would feel a huge amount. It would change our whole internal story about them. That Disney film called *Ratatouille* did an amazing job that way, a super beautiful offering, fiction of course, but it makes a powerful point that isn't fiction at all. And there's an important point to make here about anthropomorphizing. Anthropomorphizing is about imagining that animals are like us, but that focus goes the wrong way. Empathy is just the opposite: it is about us seeing that we are like them.

One of the tragedies happening in our world right now that breaks my heart is that we think of all sea creatures as lesser beings. When a trophy hunter posts a picture of the tiger that he shot and puts it on social media, the world goes nuts with sadness and rage. But when a dude in Florida posts a photo of a 400-pound bluefin tuna he just caught, no one takes issue. We would never eat owl, but we have no problem eating octopus. To me, that octopus or bluefin tuna is just as sentient as an owl or tiger; they are all highly advanced spiritual beings, perhaps far more advanced than us, and the taking of their lives is just as consequential. Maybe it is because fish don't have the kind of faces that we can relate to, or arms and legs, or whatever it is. We wouldn't eat cheetah meat, but it's no problem killing hundreds of thousands of tuna every day, to the point where they are on the verge of population collapse. Isn't it a strange thing?

It seems to me that the next step in human evolution is to see through that kind of judgment and evolve our consciousness up to the next level. Thinking what that next level would be, it feels obvious to me that it includes acknowledging the equal sentience and life-value of all beings. It seems clear that we are going to get to that point, so let's just fast-forward to there now and start behaving accordingly. We can become the enlightened stewards of life in our world instead of the disconnected orcs who are destroying it. Humans clearly have a

cognitive superpower that other creatures don't have; let's use that power to elevate ourselves spiritually up to their level as well. The joy that would come from that would be immeasurably life-changing for human culture.

Q. The Laysan albatross is classified as "near threatened" on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International, 2018). Other albatross species, too, are endangered, and some populations are declining. As *Albatross* implies, species extinction is a direct consequence of our runaway consumerism. Why is it, do you think, that we care about species extinction? What exactly do we feel we are losing? Are we concerned about individual endangered species for their own sake; do we interpret their fate as a portent of our own impending extinction, and is that what we are ultimately grieving; or is it the loss of a cherished idea of the world as an entangled multi-species community that troubles us? Or all or none of the above?

A. Well, we know biologically that the loss of a species removes that component of the complex living ecosystem they are a part of, which affects the whole system. That matters, especially as more and more of those puzzle pieces are being lost. But for me, there is another, philosophical level to it. I feel the loss of a species similarly to the loss of a language; it is a tragedy because it is a reduction in complexity. It is the loss of a unique thread of consciousness, an irreplaceable piece of the diversity of our world. That, to me, is our deepest role, our most fundamental mandate: to increase complexity. There is this force in the universe that is increasing complexity. From the original homogeneous primordial plasma, nature is generating order out of disorder. The amount of data it would take to accurately describe the universe as it is now utterly dwarfs the amount that it would take to describe the early universe. There is this complexity arising everywhere, and it is what created us, our minds, and the whole incomprehensibly amazing living world we are part of. Everything we create in our lives contributes to this expanding complexity—poetry, art, literature, music, architecture, science, and so on. Every species in the world is another fractal manifestation of this emerging complexity, and there is something about that, it matters on a really core level.

I find this line of thought interesting because it is one way you can define the political landscape right now. If you're on the left, you're somebody who can bear complexity and diversity, and who wants to increase and celebrate that on all levels: racial complexity, gender complexity, environmental complexity, intellectual complexity, scientific complexity, spiritual complexity. If you're on the right, especially the far right, you don't like complexity; you want simplicity and certainty, even all the way to a binary level: black and white, good and evil, us and them, right and wrong; less science, less art, less education, less thinking. I believe the desire for complexity is driven by love and wonderment, and the desire for simplicity is driven by fear. It's a spiritual dilemma that resides in every one of us, and individual people fall on a spectrum that parallels our politics.

If albatrosses go extinct, in one way that's a natural thing because species have been going extinct forever, and hopefully the individual members can live out their lives without suffering the knowledge of their extinction. Eventually, we will all go extinct as the sun burns out and the Earth ceases to exist. If humans go extinct sooner—if, say, we have a nuclear war—then in a few million years from now, there will be whole new forests, whole new megafauna, whole new species of everything. The cosmic dance of nature is not in any kind of danger from human behavior; and at the same time there is an incalculable value to be placed on every individual life, and on every branch of the tree of life. If we could rise to our highest level of being, fully understand our connection with all beings, then we would value every species, and every individual life, as our highest priority.

That's my wish for the world: that we collectively remember our loving nature, really connect with that and make it the primary focus of our culture; and in that remembering, we would become the loving stewards that we have the capacity to be. We already have become the inadvertent stewards of the Earth; humans control and have dominion over every ecosystem on the planet now, including our atmosphere. We could become the loving, caring stewards of those systems, and of each other as well, by the way. It would be such a much more joyful way of being.

Q. What kinds of reactions have you received from people who have watched *Albatross*? Have any patterns become apparent to you?

A. Well, *Albatross* is having a pretty sweet flight out into the world so far. There is of course a lot of talk about plastic, which is the part I'm least interested in. But on the whole people tend to receive it as it was intended, as a multi-layered piece of literature. It is incredibly fulfilling to meet people who reflect back to me the themes and nuances that are built in there. There is even a little following developing out there who watch it over and over again like a meditation, and they write to me with new observations and insights every time. That's affirming because it's how I meant it, like a music album that you don't just listen to once but get to know as a friend. I have seen it more than 2000 times myself, and it feels new to me again every time, but I guess I'm probably a little bit biased.

Because *Albatross* was gifted to the world, we don't have any commercial distribution network behind us, so it only spreads by personal word of mouth. But that is happening in all kinds of interesting ways, and it seems even to be increasing lately. People around the world are accepting our invitation to host screenings on all different scales, from dorm rooms to school classrooms to even renting big theaters and opening the doors to the public. We continue to receive touching reports of how people shared the experience and connected with it and felt something together. *Albatross* has been translated into ten languages so far, and it is starting to spread in new places like South Korea and India and the Middle East. It is being taught in schools and universities in lots of different disciplines: humanities, literature, psychology, art, film, environmental studies. So I guess you could say that Albie has made it out past the line of surf and is at least not losing altitude!

I know the material addressed in this film is not easy to face, so it gives me hope to see people finding the courage to make the journey that it offers. There is a value in doing the work of witnessing, it takes you somewhere that is hard to get to any other way. Love is an easy word to say, but how do we really feel it, in our bones, at the core of our being, so that it becomes the new unshakable foundation of a transformed world

view? *Albatross* is my best attempt to raise that question. I want to have that conversation. Let's go find that doorway together.

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