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# Waves of Heat and Heraclitus

by Michael Paul Nelson

We have all looked at the world through waves of heat. Maybe they come off the pavement on a brilliant summer day, or maybe from a campfire that becomes an optical keystone holding friends together in a shared, thermal gaze. And we have all tried to draw distinctions between the illusion of those experiences and the seeming permanence of our daily lives. But recently, we experience waves of heat of a wholly different kind and intensity, waves quickly slipping from the category of anomalous to the normal.

This desire to explain the experiences of our daily lives – to understand, categorize, and generalize phenomena – is a convergence of our context on this Earth, long stretches of time, and our big human brains. We have been wondering forever.

Heraclitus was a philosopher in Ancient Greece in about 500 BCE, making him even more ancient than Socrates. Heraclitus was embroiled in a generations-old debate about the ultimate structure and form of the universe. What was it, the Greeks wanted to know, that explained everything else, what was the fundamental substance of the universe? What was, to use their word, *arché*?

Heraclitus was a man of many nicknames: “The Riddler,” “The Obscure,” “The Weeping Philosopher,” “The Dark One.” People thought his philosophy

pessimistic and depressing. For him, fire was the substance explaining all else. Fire represents the contrasting character of the world because it is simultaneously stable (a flame's form is constant) and changing (within a flame all is constant change). And fire, too, has the power to change its surroundings, the power to be both a force of destruction and of rebirth. Everything changes and is in flux, Heraclitus observed. Change is core. This "fluxy" view of nature suggests that reality is not, in fact, composed of any number of substances that are material and eternal and reducible, but rather is a process of continual creation and destruction. The phrase "You can never step into the same river twice" is the most public articulation of Heraclitus' philosophy.

We who live in the dominant Western culture are caught in a dilemma. In our search for stasis, permanence, we find that all around us is only change, flux. And of course change makes us uneasy. How often have you heard, "people don't like change"? At the same time there are changes, ephemera, that we embrace. We would never try to capture a summer wind in a jar, or to paint an autumn chanterelle. These are things whose wonder and beauty, we know, is tied directly and completely to their evanescent nature, and we love them for this.

To our ear, it sounds like the Ancient Greeks were engaged in science – and in a way that is certainly true. They craved rigorous and systematic and empirical explanations for the reality that we experience in the world. Heraclitus even believed this search for structure (what he called Logos) was the single highest human pursuit possible.

While certainly science-y, Heraclitus and colleagues were embarked on a hallowed mission. This search for arché was a search for the central and

eternal substance, a search for the substance causing all change and motion. This search was for the divine and the sacred. Heraclitus is in fact suggesting that fire is sacred, fire is a divine substance. And one more thing, because fire is both divine and the source and substance of everything, by extension the world around us becomes sacred too. Fire, and the world built upon it, possesses what current philosophers refer to as intrinsic value – value transcending use value, value we associate with our children, maybe our most precious family heirlooms, and our fellow humans. Fire’s universality radiates outward, transferring that intrinsic value to the entire world.

Can we imagine, or re-imagine, that world? This is our great challenge, to reimagine a world that is sacred (“sacred,” from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning to set apart, to make holy, to immortalize). And in this world of change, and fire, and the sacred, can we reimagine our own place as well?

If this is our task, to make the world once again sacred and to find our way in it, we need all hands on deck. We need scientists and ethicists and politicians and business leaders, sure. But we also need artists and writers and poets and musicians and dancers. We are called to perhaps the greatest exercise in moral imaging in the history of the world; how could we bring this new world into existence without the full power and force of human imagination?

The art of David Carmack Lewis is a critical prompt. It encourages us to think not only about fire and impermanence, but us to consider the concept of scale. Sometimes these are scales of time and space: big hulking seemingly permanent industrial engines harnessing impermanent fire, and little campfires which can trigger massive forest fires. Sometimes these are scales of harm or impact: a forest fire yes, but new growth emerging and the predictable.

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continuity of the stars and a cerulean sky. And sometimes these are scales of ethical commitment: those engines can stop, and sit and rust, and we can choose a different way. In this new world, we need to think more clearly about scale.

We face a moral crisis, and we need all of the moral rally points we can muster. Art can serve that function, prompting our imaginations, our conversations, and new ways of life on this bruised blessed Earth. To believe that the fact of eternal change justifies any and all change is not only a logical mistake, but it is a moral failure of monumental and monstrous proportions.

We have to get better at this. We have to internalize the reality of Heraclitus, sure. But, in a time of fire, in a time of change\*, what kind of people will we be, and what kind of world will we bring forth? As we stand on the road gazing at our future through the heat, these are the questions and the choices before us.

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\* A phrase (coined by poet John Morgan) I humbly borrow from brave colleagues at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (led by scientist, dancer, musician, and choreographer Dr. Mary Beth Leigh), engaged in the interface between environmental science, arts, and humanities.