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vitawellsart@vitawells.net

The Subjectivity and Instability of Perception Vita Wells

This paper is prepared in conjunction with
“The Stories We Live By”
An exhibition of sculptural work by the author
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Preface

It turns out that the default position is life.

Traditionally, an author establishes her conclusion in the introduction, develops her argument through the body of the paper, then returns in her conclusion to the (by then irrefutable) point she means to make. This paper ostensibly concerns perception, as does my art, and its introduction, body and conclusion represent to examine how we take in and process experience. But when I step back and review my exploration of perception, I observe an undercurrent that clearly shaped that exploration and turns out to be its destination.

This backdrop astonishes me. I didn't start there, and I certainly didn't mean to be inclined one way or the other in the course of my research, thinking and writing. I planned to conduct neutral interdisciplinary research into how we perceive, and to draw reasonably constructed and objective conclusions from that research. But having read and reflected on neurobiology, psychology, and philosophy, written the introduction that follows here, labored through the body of this paper, and laid out a conclusion, when I regard the whole from some remove, I

have to acknowledge that a bias emerged: The default position is life. An open-ended presence, a condition of possibility, an irrepressible welling courses under and through experience.

The presence of this highly subjective take on things will be quite self-evident to the reader, but finding it informing my work was a surprise to me.

I must acknowledge that regardless of how many citations might grace (or litter) this text, the bias undoubtedly compromises any pretense of scholarship. I've decided, however, that while scholarly aspirations operate vigorously near the heart of my own personal neuroses, I can live with a growing tendency toward sensing life as the default position. And I can live with it unapologetically.

Introduction

A core theme in my work is perception: why we see as we do, what influences, constrains and enables what and how we see things, or don't see things, and how that can change moment to moment. Though we feel it to be an objective and fixed reality, what we take in and how we process it is highly subjective and unstable. This is not inconsequential. Our subjective and unstable perception translates into the content of our lives and shapes our identities; it's the underpinning for everything else, and ultimately it's all tied into making meaning of our lives. So exploring perception is interesting. The role reading plays in this is big, of course, hence my primary medium: books. My work responds to reading's

contribution to our sense of who we are and what's meaningful, to how we perceive ourselves and the world we inhabit.

This paper has four parts, each related to perception. I'll begin with comments from thirty five thousand feet about our arrival in the mid twentieth century, making sweeping and unsubstantiated generalizations along the way. In the second part I'll draw on current scholarship relative to perceiving, living and truth. The third section will address my art, and in the conclusion I'll wrap everything up neatly and leave us all inspired to go forth into the world, a world that's in fact not very neat and that reliably challenges any definitive conclusions we might make about it.

Part One — A Quick Survey

Our Western philosophical heritage presupposes Truth as apart from, preexisting and foundational to human existence. Truth is not only enduring, but can be known, is the same for everyone, is the singular lens through which one perceives Reality, and will (thereby) set us free. Until more recently, the philosophical squabbles over the centuries haven't concerned whether Truth exists so much as how one can come to know it, and what it is. Consistent with this legacy, from a neurobiological perspective, our brains are wired to tell us that what we perceive before us is in fact what's there: a self-contained entity separate from us, an entity whose characteristics exist independently of our regard and are knowable.

The late nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the challenge and the subsequent dismantling of these baseline understandings in all scholarly disciplines, revealing and contributing to their disruption throughout the social fabric:

- ≈ Well over a century ago Nietzsche was already telling us that there are no facts, only interpretations, and that things are not as they appear to be. Philosophers since have only hastened Truth's and perception's dissolution.
- ≈ Freud, his disciples and his detractors excavated deep into the human psyche, finding that behind, under, and through a consciousness purporting to be the whole of experience, exists a mostly inaccessible human reality of extraordinary depth, breadth, vitality and consequence.
- ≈ Post structural analyses have explored and illuminated the constructedness and indeterminacy of language, conceptualization and meaning across the disciplinary spectrum of the arts and social sciences.
- ≈ Neurobiology has revealed the plasticity of synaptic systems—the fundamental components of the brain's functionality—their impressionability and generativity not only in early development, but also through maturity and advanced age. Neurobiology has also revealed the limitations and discretion of our sensory systems' selection and interpretation functions, characteristics that precipitate inconsistencies of perception from person to person, and, for any one person, from moment to moment.

- ≈ Cognitive science has demonstrated how the brain develops and deploys mechanisms for interpreting and navigating the world, mechanisms for information association, interpretation and response that are fundamentally discretionary yet barely flexible, and efficient yet often misguided.

In the West, these intellectual and scientific disruptions have both reflected and been given able assists by (among many other things) the profound irrationalities and massive devastations of the two world wars; the more recent broad adoption of Eastern spiritual traditions and philosophies; the popularization of psychology; and the onslaught of difference: Extensive migrations across the globe are complemented by a massively technologically interconnected world—the irrefutable legitimacy of great swaths of people with quite different ideas about life, lands unremitting body blows to the notion of one group’s possessing a single unified truth relevant to all.

In short, in every place conceivable—from the ivory tower to Main Street, the suburbs and rural America, and by every route imaginable—experiential, philosophical, visceral, spiritual and scientific, the notion that there exists an absolute truth, and that what we perceive before us is in fact what is there and can be known, has been undone.

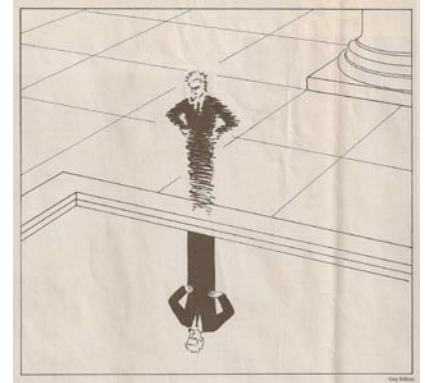
My recognizing as much is no great intellectual breakthrough—it’s catch-up, at best. What intrigues me in this, however, is the disconnect between what we know and how we actually live our lives. Pursuit of a unified transcendent truth, and confidence that what we see before us is in fact wholly what is there, die hard.

Part Two—More Recent Scholarship

Clear now on the subjectivity and instability of perception, two questions naturally arise, sequentially: First, why don't we just broaden our perspective to include the totality of what's there? Walter Freeman, professor emeritus of neurobiology at UC Berkeley, concludes his provocative article on the functioning of the olfactory system by quoting and rebutting William Blake. He writes, "The poet William Blake wrote: 'If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.'" And then Freeman's rebuttal: "Such cleansing would not be desirable. Without the protection of the doors of perception...people and animals would be overwhelmed by eternity." Freeman's "doors of perception" "[combine] sensory messages with past experience and with expectation to identify both the stimulus and its particular meaning to the individual."¹ The dynamics of perception he describes in the article serve to reduce the avalanche of stimuli we humans experience moment to moment to a volume small enough to be processed by our finite neurological systems, and meaningful enough as to be actionable.

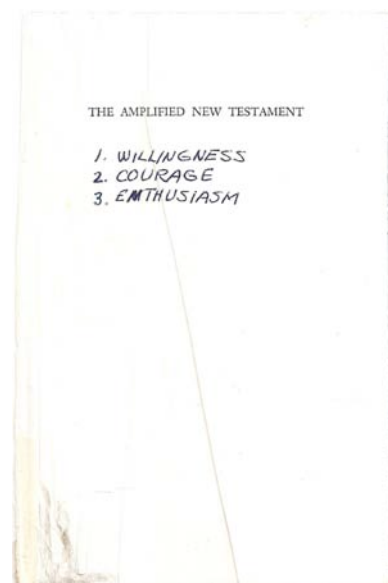
The first question is thus answered: Given the neurological reality we're working with, we can't broaden our perceptual range to include all of what is before us. We require interpretive lenses. From that, the second question arises: Why then can't we live in full recognition that the particular interpretive lenses we use are in fact limited, relative, changing according to experience and context,

constructed and fundamentally negotiable? The neurobiological response would be something along these lines: Meaning, not information, is the currency of our brains,² and meaning is the product of synaptic networks that are largely what they are, indeed plastic but robust and therefore resistant to change. As for the response from the social sciences, considerable ink has been spilt on this question.



Guy Billout, New York Times, October 14, 2004

We are fundamentally relational beings.³ Sharing the meanings of things is largely what puts us in relationship, and narrative is the medium through which we share meaning: “story functions as the primary avenue to the self of another person.”⁴ The psychologist Jerome Bruner writes, “life stories must mesh...within a community...; tellers and listeners must share some ‘deep structure’ about the nature of a ‘life’.”⁵ He’s talking about culture. Theorist Stuart Hall describes culture as “a process, a set of practices...[that] depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways.”⁶ That is, “stories are a culture’s coin and currency”⁷; a culture’s stories are the tools we use to make sense of things, to explain discrepancies, to guide our attention, to model ourselves.⁸ In short: culture is “The Stories We Live By”; hence this exhibition’s name.



We theorize about “culture” as though it were something at some remove from individuals’ lives. But we live by stories because we live by way of narrative. Paul John Eakin, Professor Emeritus of English at Indiana University, writes, “The basic proposition...is that narrative is not merely something we tell, listen to, read, or invent; it is an essential part of our sense of who we are.”⁹ Bruner explicates this further in his seminal essay “Life As Narrative”: “Eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.”¹⁰

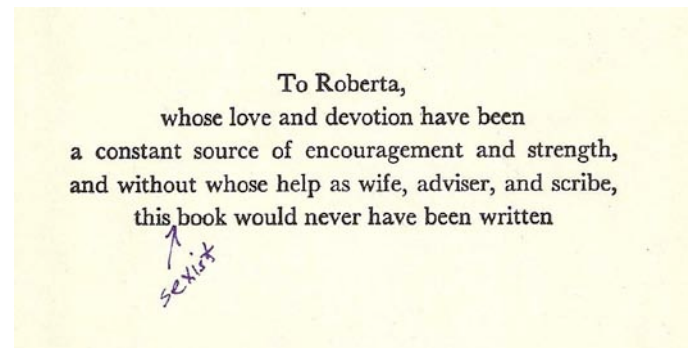
In later work Bruner explores the relationship between cultural narratives and the individual’s narrative of self: “A self-making narrative is something of a balancing act. It must...create a conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one’s own, a certain freedom of choice, a degree of possibility. But it must also relate the self to a world of others—to friends and family, to institutions, to the past, to reference groups. But the commitment to others that is implicit in relating oneself to others of course limits our autonomy. We seem virtually unable to live without both, autonomy and commitment, and our lives strive to balance the two. So do the self-narratives we tell ourselves.”¹¹

Bruner recognizes that it is not always a felicitous balance. Culture is “both a solution to communal living and, more covertly, a threat and challenge to those who live within its bounds... A culture’s narrative resources...conventionalize the iniquities it generates and thereby contain its imbalances and its

incompatibilities.”¹² The self-narrative/culture interface is not a theoretical matter. “Cultural meanings...organize and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects,”¹³ Stuart Hall writes. Eakin puts it more bluntly: “Social accountability conditions us from early childhood to believe that our recognition as persons is to be transacted through the exchange of identity narratives. The verdict of those for whom we perform is virtually axiomatic: no satisfactory narrative..., no self.”¹⁴

Great expanses of critical theory elaborate on that recognition. Judith Butler describes how the broadly-shared interpretive lenses—the cultural norms— “[condemn] those who fail to approximate the norm...to a death within life.”¹⁵

Butler, Michel Foucault and other critical theorists call this cultural lens a “grid of intelligibility” or “grid of legibility”—it is the societal grid, or matrix, or lens, through which an individual is made visible, or not, even to herself. I’ll return to the grid later in reference to my piece “Believing Is Seeing.”



The cultural theorists are overwhelmingly focused on the debilitating effects of a culture’s canonical stories. But stories, even canonical stories, work both ways. As Bruner writes, “While fiction may begin on familiar ground, it aims to go beyond it into the realm of the possible, the might-be, could have been, perhaps will be.”¹⁶ The established and the possible are forever in tension with each other. “Narrative fiction creates possible worlds, ... tempt[ing] us into thinking of alternatives beyond

it... In the end it has the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real.”¹⁷ Biography and autobiography, and even examples in the social sciences, function similarly. I’ll return to this idea in discussing what I call my celebratory pieces, particularly “Life Came Breaking In.”

Now I’m going to take a great leap and make an audacious assertion. Given everything I’ve said and the expanses of scholarship and scientific inquiry on which it rests, I conclude that there is no absolute objective truth that we can know. This is not the leap; there are scads of big thinkers saying as much. The leap is this: The elevation of an interpretive lens to the position of absolute truth is tantamount to eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Such an elevation—albeit paradoxically reflexive—operates against the grain of the fundamental character of human existence. It’s a grasping for fixity, a reduction of the unfathomable to a paltry rendition, and an evisceration of life. More on this later in reference to my work “Samsara.”

So: No absolute objective truth. No singular interpretive lens upon which all could agree. What to do, then? How to live? Where to look to orient the particulars of our lives, to make sense of things, to render our lives meaningful?

I’ve been reading broadly, and across disciplines that don’t seem at first glance to have much to do with each other. What interests me is that across this body of work, a surprisingly diverse range of authors suggest paths for finding meaning in our lives that resonate.¹⁸ The key to hearing the resonance is hearing at the heart of each something qualitatively different from objective truth. There is a change of register in this hearing, a turn from an interpretation, from an

understanding of how things are, to an attitude, to orienting oneself with and responding to a condition. It is something like shifting from talking about a noun to doing a verb, a verb in the present subjunctive tense. Like stepping back from a certain kind of certainty about what we perceive, and simultaneously stepping into a kind of certainty that's more sensed than known in the conventional way; shifting into responding to an incessant behind-the-scenes throbbing, an irrepressible welling.

Two simultaneous and complementary moves: a stepping back, and a stepping into.

On stepping back from certainty, Bruner writes: "Unmasking one perspective only reveals another. And however salutary this act may be as a critical exercise, it does not necessarily yield a supra-perspectival version of reality—if such a thing were ever possible. We comfort ourselves with the conclusion that it is the awareness of alternative perspectives, not the view from Olympus, that sets us free to create a properly pragmatic view of the Real."¹⁹

Mark Freeman, another psychologist whose work deals with narrative and memory, writes: "The challenge is to live mindfully enough of the present, and of the limits of one's perspective, to allow more adequate or comprehensive perspectives into view."²⁰

That's the stepping back. As for the second move, stepping into, Gianni Vattimo, philosopher, theologian, and statesman, couples stepping away from absolute truth with stepping into what I termed "an irrepressible welling". He writes, "We can never claim that our point of view is the same as God's. We can only

acknowledge that we see things on the basis of certain prejudices, certain interests, and if truth is possible at all, it is the result of an accord that is not necessitated by any definitive evidence, only by loving charity, solidarity, the human...need to live in harmony with others.”²¹

Similarly, Mark Freeman drawing on Iris Murdoch’s notion of “unselfing,” writes, “The very act of attending, fully, to what is other-than-self, serves to check and diminish our own selfish impulses...this is particularly so when the objects of our attention are other people.”²² And therein “remains hope, manifested in those occasional intimations of reality—and goodness—that creep through the [‘anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying veil which partially conceals the world’].”²³

Even in Judith Butler—who one would hardly place in a register of authors gesturing toward the ephemeral—are suggestions of “that incessant behind-the-scenes throbbing.” She writes that her work in *Gender Trouble* was not “done simply out of a desire to play with language or prescribe theatrical antics,” but “from a desire to live, to make life possible, and to rethink the possible as such.”²⁴

In the same way that “culture” is not a theoretical remove from individuals’ moment-to-moment experience, this “irrepressible welling” is not a mysterious remove from our lives, the preserve and experience of some individuals and a non-reality for others. With “irrepressible welling” I do not mean to suggest some esoteric subject matter pertaining to discretionary and marginal disciplines of arguable relevance, or some spiritual/transcendent mountaintop hocus pocus in the company of an emaciated guru, but something at the heart of normal, everyday, human experience.

Butler's "desire to live, to make life possible."

Psychologist Carl Rogers' "actualizing tendency of the universe."²⁵

Philosopher David Loy's "groping self-organization" of the cosmos.²⁶

Walter Freeman's neural system, with its pervasive and incessant movement, without any external prompting, coupled with a propensity to self-organize instantly into meaning-making.²⁷

Vattimo's loving-kindness "at the horizon line of the near future toward which we gaze."²⁸

Virginia Woolf noted at the conclusion of a long entry in her diary one morning in February 1922 that she had "meant to write about death, only life came breaking in as usual."²⁹

Life came breaking in as usual. It's an irrepressible welling that isn't an objective thing, a noun, but an adjective coupled with a verb's responding. Nouns are known in "the conventional way"; adjectives and verbs are known experientially, in a different register from rational knowledge, and about the only thing you can say about these verbs is that they're the present tense subjunctive. "Present" meaning right here. "Subjunctive" meaning possible. Possibility right here. It's a condition inviting response, not a thing. Can't be adequately named, can't be properly depicted, can't be fully conceptualized.

Can be responded to.

Possibility.

Possibility in Bruner's fusion of memory and imagination,³⁰ of what is established with what is possible, in the self's construction and reconstruction.

In Loy's "condition of the possibility of storying,... of novelty, of doing and becoming something different."³¹

In Freeman's "novel [neural] activity patterns...[underlying] the brain's ability to create insight, ... grow, reorganize [itself] and reach into [its] environment to change it to [its] own advantage."³²

And in Vattimo's *caritas*, "liv[ing] in harmony with others," "overcoming ... every form of alienation."³³

A stepping away from objective truth, a stepping into a condition of open-endedness, of possibility.³⁴

Part Three—My Art in Relation to the Above

The objects I've made over these years reflect my exploration of perception, and particularly how reading contributes to shaping what and how we see, constituting our identities, constituting who we are becoming. This multimodal exploration to date—in my art-making, in my research, and in my life—has ushered me to glimpsing that it is precisely recognizing and embracing the subjectivity and instability of perception that enables possibility. I sense that my "multimodal exploration" going forward will concern establishing that glimpse as my pole star, but that'll be another story.

Turning to my art: Books express culture, and, as I observed earlier, culture constrains and oppresses, *and* it empowers and liberates. My work gestures toward

that paradoxical reality, and it explores the relationships among what we think we know and believe, what we might call the “biblio-contexts” in which we live, and how those contexts are shaped both by systems of power and by the open-ended possibility inherent in human life.



“Believing Is Seeing,”³⁵ for example, directly addresses patriarchy as expressed in 19th and 20th century America: an alloy of rationalism, empiricism and a male-centered, hierarchical power structure. The education system, the public library system, the publishing industry, the printed media—all structuring and regulating perception, all rendering a story with an assumed backdrop: How Things Are. “Believing Is Seeing” is an articulation of Michel Foucault’s grid of intelligibility; it is about what is read, by whom, and how; about reading as a social practice, culturally shaped and ideologically purposive.



This sculpture speaks to a specific illustration of this phenomenon: the institutional architecture explicitly deployed by patriarchy to compel the general populace into alignment with the 19th century American ideal of the model citizen. A companion piece could be comprised of Buddhist books, or communist books, or queer books. This piece is not about *those* grids. It happens that no one’s getting rid of those books yet, so they don’t come cheap. *And*, I made it during a time I was steeped in feminist theory. It’s a reflection of my context—another grid of intelligibility.

“Women Can’t Paint” continues the critique of patriarchy, inviting Virginia Woolf’s eloquence on the weight of patriarchy’s hand; the subtlety, pervasiveness and force of its voice; and the glimmer of hope of finding one’s way in its context.



In the same vein, “Etiquette” jabs at patriarchy’s distaff manifestation, the stultifying residue of Victorian propriety, requisite rectitude spelled out in a book—power regulating thought, word and deed in the most private spaces of life.



Three pieces address the relationship between perception and epistemology, specifically post-Enlightenment epistemology. “Abridged,” “The Universe,” and “Orderliness Is Next to Godliness”



simultaneously make two complementary moves: They critique the limitations of Western rationalism, the presumption of purporting to contain the unfathomable of existence between the

covers of a book, a book devoid of myth, metaphor and mystery. *And*, the interiors of these three pieces return mystery, myth and metaphor to the story, gesturing toward that immeasurably creative incomprehensible, that irrepressible welling.

Balancing the critical work discussed above, “The Waves,” “Life Came Breaking In,” and “Tipping the Velvet” speak to reading’s generative potential. These are celebratory works, my response to taking stories deep into myself, to having intimate conversations with characters and authors, and to participating



in the exquisite, heart-rending and fecund interior of life by virtue of gifted authors. Earlier I referred to Jerome Bruner’s attributing to fiction “the power to change our habits of conceiving what is real.”³⁶ Maryanne Wolf, Director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University, writes more explicitly: “[R]eading enables us to try on, identify with, and ultimately enter for a brief time the wholly different perspective of another person’s consciousness... We never come back the same, [and] we are no longer limited by the confines of our own thinking. Wherever they were set, our original boundaries are challenged, teased, and gradually placed somewhere new. An expanding sense of ‘other’ changes who we are, and...what we imagine we can be.”³⁷ These three celebratory pieces honor the potential of reading to escort us toward life-affirming possibility.

“Samsara” emerges from the “great leap” I mentioned earlier, and draws on a foundational story in “The Good Book”—Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of Knowledge. I relate the Genesis story of the



instinctive, insistent and overwhelming need to know what cannot be known—to establishing absolute objective truth—with Buddhists’ locating the source of human suffering in ego’s clinging to a self. In both stories we see an assertion of ego, an “I” rent by its grasping from concord with the basic character of the cosmos; we see perception distorted by that grasping, and the resultant suffering.³⁸ I’ll return to this theme in my conclusion.

While “Retelling Gertrude Stein” revisits Samsara’s consideration of ego assertion, it moves two steps deeper into the specificity of Gertrude Stein’s life. Created as part of a performance piece for the square in front of the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco, and presented there during the 2011 “Seeing Gertrude Stein” exhibition, the object and accompanying text highlight the performative and self-promoting aspects of Stein’s The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, and caution against lionizing Stein as liberatory icon. At play in all three—Stein’s autobiographical performance of self, the 2011 exhibition and catalogue, and my “Retelling”—is creating and cultivating a perspective: intentional shaping what is seen, how and by whom, primarily by means of text.



Conclusion

Unsettling as it is, the subjectivity and instability of perception isn't a problem to be solved, it's a reality not only to acknowledge intellectually, but to explore and to appropriate in experience.

The subjectivity and instability of perception is the only point of access to possibility, and that possibility is life. The key is not to force solidity out of the ambiguity. Insisting on knowing, on reaching for, grasping and eating the apple, reduces the infinite to an eviscerated finite whose limited story lines entangle, constrain and asphyxiate. The key is to follow a thread whose fibers are drawn from the ground of our lives as lived, and to follow it with as much loving-kindness (*caritas, metta*) and integrity as possible, focusing on the clear bit immediately before us, and allowing the balance to remain a chaotic, unruly unknown. No entanglement.

This sounds like a lovely experience. Like enlightenment. It's not. It's scary as hell and harder than hard. There may be no entanglement, but there's no solid ground, either. When I inevitably I look up from the bit before me and regard the immense unknown, my reptilian brain stem—evolved specifically to put a premium on survival and to override all other systemic responses—says, “No, this is not lovely. God knows what threats are just there out of sight.” And before I know it a serpent shows up offering an apple.³⁹

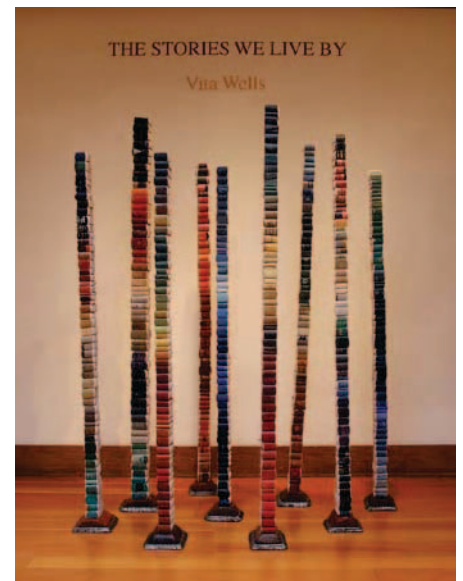
Yet, “When the word ‘truth’ is uttered, a shadow of violence is cast as well.”⁴⁰

Knowing How Things Are is mighty tempting, yet it's precisely that insistence on certainty that preempts loving-kindness. It's not in acting by compliance with an absolute truth that I align myself with that irrepressible welling, that condition for the subjunctive verb. In the context of not knowing, I have a choice, and it is precisely in the discretionary choosing to affirm life that I accord myself with the possibility that is its ultimate character.

How to conclude, then, when any definitive conclusion risks committing the error of certainty? Not with metaphysics or any other rarefaction pretending to Truth, but with honoring the shared human experience of finding our way, step by step, through a scary and splendid landscape. "Learning and relearning, ever again, how to live."⁴¹

I conclude with "Still Standing," a piece that celebrates drawing a glimmering thread from the dense impenetrables, ambiguities and open-endedness of life, and following that thread of possibility, *by way of reading books*, books replete with metaphor, myth and mystery.

Bedraggled, wind-blown, parched though we may be, we lovers of books will continue to read books as a way of making meaning in our lives.



Endnotes:

¹ Walter Freeman, "The Physiology of Perception", *Scientific American*, 1991, Vol 264, (2) pp. 78-85.

² Freeman, "Perception". The currency of the brain being meaning rather than information is a key contribution of Walter Freeman's work, on which I don't elaborate in this paper. In sum, and oversimplified: Neural assemblies (synaptic networks) develop in parts of the brain in response to experience. The character of experience shapes the character of those assemblies' responses, and thereby their structure. When neural assemblies receive information from sensory receptors, what they send on for further processing in the cortical regions of the brain are not extracts from what they received from sensory receptors (data), but their own responses, as shaped by past experience. In short, they send on meaning, not bits of information. I draw the reader's attention to Freeman's article "Nonlinear Brain Dynamics and Intention According to Aquinas," published in *Mind and Matter*, 2008, Vol. 6 (2), 207-234.

³ See Oliver Sachs, *Awakenings* and *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*; Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*; and Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories, Law, Literature Life*, among many others.

⁴ Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically, How We Create Identity in Narrative* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 57.

⁵ Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative", *Social Research* Vol. 71, No. 3, Fall 2004, p. 699. (Originally published in 1989.)

⁶ Stuart Hall, *Representation, Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 2.

⁷ Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories, Law, Literature, Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, chapter 4.

⁹ Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, ix.

¹⁰ Bruner, "Life as Narrative", 694.

¹¹ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 78.

¹² *Ibid.*, 92-93.

¹³ Hall, *Representation*, 3.

¹⁴ Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 44.

¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge 1999), p xx.

¹⁶ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁸ Let me acknowledge that the literature (most clearly the sciences) says that we see what we look for, what we're primed to see. Assuming that mechanisms for each sensory system are representative of the general mechanisms for how we take in, process and respond to sensory stimuli, the following from Varela, Thompson and Rosch is relevant: "The optic nerve connects from the eyes to a region in the thalamus called the lateral geniculate nucleus (LGN) and from there to the visual cortex...80 percent of what any LGN cell listens to comes not from the retina but from the dense interconnectedness of other parts of the brain. Furthermore, one can see that there are more fibers coming from the cortex down to the LGN than there are going in the reverse direction." Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993), 94-95. See also Walter Freeman's discussion of reafferences in "The Physiology of Perception", his article "Nonlinear Brain Dynamics and Intention According to Aquinas," published in *Mind and Matter*, 2008, Vol. 6 (2), 207-234. Also see Siegel (cited below), quoting Engel, Fries and Singer: "...the processing of stimuli is controlled by top-down influences that strongly shape the intrinsic dynamics of thalamocortical networks and constantly create predictions about forthcoming sensory events." (134)
VW note: All of which does not necessarily mean, however, that what we see isn't there.

¹⁹ Bruner, *Making Stories*. 23.

²⁰ Mark Freeman, *Hindsight* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 220.

²¹ Gianni Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), 36.

²² Mark Freeman, *Hindsight*, 223.

²³ *Ibid.*, 221, also quoting Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (London: Routledge, 1970) p. 80.

²⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xx.

²⁵ David Brazier "Living Buddhism" *Tricycle*, Winter 2011, p. 108.

²⁶ David Loy, *The World is Made of Stories* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 96.

²⁷ Walter Freeman, *Perception*, 78-85.

²⁸ Vattimo, *Farewell*, 140.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume II 1920-1924*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell with Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 17 February 1922 entry.

³⁰ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 93.

³¹ Loy, *World*, 39.

³² Walter Freeman, *Perception*, 78-85.

³³ Vattimo, *Farewell*, 36, 140.

³⁴ See Daniel J. Siegel, *The Mindful Brain* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007) for a resonant treatment of stepping away from and stepping in to. Stepping away from “top-down” responses to experience (“embedded in beliefs in the form of mental models of right and wrong and judgments of good and bad” (135)); and stepping in to “receptivity” (“an intentional state of openness to whatever arises” (127)), “awareness” (“[experience is] approached with a sense of investigative interest, ... [with] features of curiosity, openness, acceptance, and love” (128)) and “attunement” (“a neural state of integration ... [enabling an openness] that is the foundation of love” (131)). “The healing that emerges with this reflective form of memory and narrative integration from a mindful exploration is deeply liberating.” (139).

³⁵ See details of this and all objects at www.vitawells.net

³⁶ Bruner, *Making Stories*, 94.

³⁷ Maryanne Wolf, *Proust and the Squid* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 7-8.

³⁸ Two lines of thought should not thrust into the body of this paper, but are worth noting (admitting): first, seeing a deeper round of *samsara* at play; and second, an elaboration on my exegesis. See “Additional Thoughts on Samsara” following these endnotes.

³⁹ This paper is noticeably bereft of suggestions on how to assume a perspective that engages with possibility. This may well reflect the author’s shortcomings in this practice. See Siegel’s (*Mindful Brain*) exploration of the range of possible responses

to experience, how to engage alternatives, and their neurological and psychological effects. Also the extensive literature on the psychological and physiological effects of practicing mindfulness, notably by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

⁴⁰ Vattimo, Farewell, 77.

⁴¹ Mark Freeman, Hindsight, 15.

Additional Thoughts on Samsara

Two lines of thought should not thrust into the body of this paper, but are worth noting (admitting): first, seeing a deeper round of *samsara* at play; and second, an elaboration on my exegesis.

1) Samsara underlying samsara:

Turns out I own lobha dosa and moha—greed, hatred and delusion—as much as anyone.

The play of biblio-context in perception is clearly illustrated in “Samsara.” I made the piece during the course of several years’ immersion in feminist theory. In that context I initially perceived ego-assertion as gendered, and created an object reflecting that perception. My point of departure was the image I saw in my mind while reading a draft version of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*: In her research in the British Library on the condition of women she found only texts written by men, and in them encountered a large authorial presence: “Somehow, before one has read three pages one is under the shadow of the letter I. ‘I’ stands in the foreground of the novel; a stalwart figure, well proportioned, but dominating the view. Behind him one may catch a glimpse of a tree or a town; but not for long. [The author] returns methodically, persistently, with a devotion that is impressive to the fact of himself.”

Initially entitled “The Apple of Man’s I,” my piece was highly-gendered. With time I came to understand that while various classic *types* of ego-assertion do have gender correlation, the underlying phenomenon is unrelated to gender. Making the piece was, in fact, my own exercise in ego assertion, in pushing back, in not seeing clearly. While I’ve modified the object somewhat (e.g., inserting Margaret Thatcher for Einstein, who never should have been in the original), the initial gender overlay is still evident—there’s more reworking to be done. Not to mention more cultivation of generosity, loving-kindness and wisdom. All kinds of opportunity there.

2) A longer-winded treatment of my scriptural hermeneutics:

The companion of context, to nurture, of course, is nature. “Samsara” begins with our creatureliness, the ground of ego-assertion, and ends with our basic survival instinct’s worldly manifestations and perceptual distortions.

We are social creatures, to be sure, being born, existing and dying in a web of relationships upon which we are dependent; and we are physical creatures, possessing bodies in which evolution has favored development of neurological wiring designed to insure survival of the individual. Distinguishing us from other creatures possessing bodies is that we also possess consciousness, and while we may talk about “mind, body and spirit” as though they were separate things, they’re indivisible; they’re one being expressing itself across the modalities of human experience. That creaturely instinct to survive expresses itself in emotional / psychological / spiritual terms—our consciousness is driven to survive to no less a degree than our bodies are.

I read the Genesis story of Adam and Eve as a story of people—creatures with consciousness—reacting to a condition of not knowing. They were created and given the breath of Life, consciousness of their being, yet existed as contingent creatures with limited knowledge. Not knowing presents a seemingly intolerable existential threat. I read the response to their condition—reaching out, grasping and eating of the Tree of Knowledge—as driven by the base-line drive for their psychosomatic selves to survive. It is a possibly heretical explication, and certainly an unorthodox one, to see a reptilian instinct to survive in the serpent’s urging the apple, but there’s value in revisiting the story outside the classic good/evil, spirit/body matrix.

In “Samsara” I relate the Genesis story of the instinctive, insistent and overwhelming need to know what cannot be known—Adam and Eve reaching for, grasping and eating the apple from the Tree of Knowledge—with Buddhist’s locating the source of human suffering in ego’s clinging to a non-self self. In both stories we see an assertion of ego, an “I” rent by its grasping from integration with creation, perception distorted by that grasping, and the resultant suffering.