

13 The Brightest Heaven of Invention

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend / The brightest heaven of
invention

Shakespeare, *Henry V*

Let me tell you about two of my favorite YouTube videos. In the first, a father and his family are in their backyard celebrating his birthday. One person hands him his present, and, seeing that someone has begun video-recording the moment, he senses there's something special about it. He takes his time opening the gift, cracking small jokes along the way. He removes the wrapping paper to find a box containing a pair of sunglasses. But these sunglasses aren't meant for blocking out the sunlight: they're made to let people like him, the colorblind, see the colors of the world. He reads the details on the back of the box longer than is necessary, drawing out the process as though trying to delay, as though preparing himself for an experience he knows will overwhelm him. He takes the black glasses out, holds them up, and silently examines them from all directions. Then someone off-camera exclaims, "Put them on!" He does, then immediately looks away from the camera. He's trying to retain his composure, to take this in his stride. But he can't help jolting between everyday items now, because to him they've all been transfigured. He's seeing for the first time the greenness of the grass, the blueness of the sky, the redness of his wife's poinsettias and her lips, finally, and the full brownness of the kids' hair and the flush peach paleness of their faces as they smile and come to him and hug him, his eyes filling with water as he keeps repeating over and over, "Oh, wow. Oh, man."

The second video opens with a top-down view of Earth, over which the International Space Station is hurtling. A piano plays as

we fade into the ISS's observation dome, the Cupola, where a mustached man, the Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield, floats and stares down at Earth, seemingly lost in reflection. The piano downbeats on a minor chord as he turns to the camera and sings the opening line of David Bowie's song *Space Oddity*: "Ground control to Major Tom." He continues singing as he floats down a corridor of wires and lens flares. Then a guitar appears in his hands as laptops float around him, seeming to balance on their wires like cobras. He sings, "Lock your Soyuz hatch and put your helmet on." (In Bowie's version the line is "Take your protein pills and put your helmet on"; Soyuz is the rocket that today takes astronauts to the ISS.) We see Hadfield singing in his padded, closet-sized quarters, singing as he floats through other shafts and rooms, returning time and again to the Cupola, bright with the light of Earth. He comes to the bridge: "Here am I floating in my tin can / Last glimpse of the world / Planet Earth is blue, and there's nothing left to do." (The original line, in Bowie's version, is "there's nothing I can do.") I don't remember when astronauts started to be able to use the internet in space, but in any case this video made me realize that the World Wide Web isn't just world-wide anymore.

At its best, technology opens our doors of perception, inspires awe and wonder in us, and creates sympathy between us. In the 1960s, some people in San Francisco started walking around wearing a button that read, "Why haven't we seen a photo of the earth from space yet?" They realized that this shift in perception – what's sometimes called the "overview effect" – would occasion a shift in consciousness. They were right: when the first photo of Earth became widely available, it turned the ground of nature into the figure, and enabled the environmental movement to occur. It allowed us all to have the perspective of astronauts, who were up in space coining new terms like "earthlight" and "earthrise" from the surface of the Moon. (Though I can't seem to find the reference, I think it might have been the comedian Norm MacDonald who said, "It must have been weird to be the first people ever to say, 'Where's the earth?' 'Oh, there it is.'")

What's needed now is a similar shift – an overview effect, finding the earthlight – for our inner environment. Who knows, maybe space exploration will play a role this time, too. After all, it did go far in giving us a common goal, a common purpose, a common story during a previous turbulent time. As the mythologist Joseph Campbell said, “The modern hero deed must be that of questing to bring to light again the lost Atlantis of the coordinated soul.”¹ This is true at both individual and collective levels.

In order to rise to this challenge, we have to lean into the experiences of awe and wonder. (Interestingly, these emotions, like outrage, also tend to go “viral” in the attention economy.) We have to demand that these forces to which our attention is now subject start standing out of our light. This means rejecting the present regime of attentional serfdom. It means rejecting the idea that we're powerless, that our angry impulses must control us, that our suffering must define us, or that we ought to wallow in guilt for having let things get this bad. It means rejecting novelty for novelty's sake and disruption for disruption's sake. It means rejecting lethargy, fatalism, and narratives of us versus them. It means using our transgressions to advance the good. This is not utopianism. This is imagination. And, as anyone with the slightest bit of imagination knows, “imaginary” is not the opposite of “real.”

Future generations will judge us not only for our stewardship of the outer environment, but of the inner environment as well. Our current crisis does not only come in the form of rising global temperatures, but also in our injured capacities of attention. Our mission, then, is not only to reengineer the world of matter, but also to reengineer our world so that we can give attention to what matters.

Today, the right sort of redesign is not yet in fashion. My purpose here has been to identify and advance it as best I could in the time and space I had. I have also sought to encourage and guide the attention of others who share my deep concern about this vast infrastructure of technological persuasion we have inherited – but who, also like me, take solace in encountering others on this road who see

the same problems, and respond to them with the same vigor of inquiry that I have been fortunate enough to enjoy in the writing of this book.

In order to do anything that matters, we must first be able to give attention to the things that matter. It's my firm conviction, now more than ever, that the degree to which we are able and willing to struggle for ownership of our attention is the degree to which we are free.

NOTES

- 1 Campbell, Joseph (2008). *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (vol. xvii). New World Library.