

## Antje Rávik Strubel

### What else have I missed?

What else have I missed? asks the protagonist of a story by the great American writer Lucia Berlin. She is sixty years-old, sitting alone on the front porch of her home in Colorado, and she's watching the crows as they land in the maple tree at sunset. By chance, she is sitting that day on the front porch, not the back, and she is not preparing dinner as she usually does at that hour. which is why she has always missed the crows.

"What else have I missed?" She asks herself aghast. "How many times in my life have I been, so to speak, on the back porch, not the front porch? What would have been said to me that I failed to hear? What love might there have been that I didn't feel?"

Huh? you're likely wondering, am I at the wrong ceremony? What do the regrets of an old woman have to do with me? Aren't we supposed to be celebrating a beginning here? The launch into a serious, bona fide life that we've spent years preparing for? Shouldn't a speech worthy of the occasion include something encouraging, edifying? Something uplifting? Shouldn't it rather evoke the responsibility we will assume in our respective fields, a well-intentioned reminder of how much depends on us, how crucial our influence will be, especially in the decades ahead that will determine whether human beings, the planet, has a future?

You're right. A proper speech ought to include such statements. Yet, when I search my mind, I can't think of anything uplifting; nothing at any rate that doesn't immediately curdle to pathos. And, as I was born in Brandenburg, anything that seems even slightly pathetic is lost on me. Perhaps, I also lack an appreciation for pathetic words. On the one hand, because I am fundamentally suspicious of pathetic language. Since not only the content, but also the linguistic form contains impurities, hypocrisies, tricks and ruses that we use to deceive ourselves, whitewash the world, make it appear better or more beautiful than it really is.

On the other hand, I've never had the pleasure of participating in such a splendid graduation ceremony. Not that I had missed it. When I graduated twenty years ago, they didn't have ceremonies like this at the University of Potsdam. I simply walked over to the office of student affairs, an improvised barracks, and picked up my diploma in a bare neon-lit room. That was all. What did I do afterwards? Did I call anybody, go for a drink with somebody? Did I celebrate my *Magisterabschluss*, which today is called a Master's Degree? I can't remember. But to this day, I occasionally wake up in terror that I haven't finished writing my master's thesis, or that I forgot to

take my final exams. At some point, my parents framed my graduate degree, so now whenever I wake up from the nightmare, at least I know it's hanging on the wall in my old bedroom.

I began studying at the university in the late 90s, during a period as challenging as the years of the pandemic might have been for you. At the time, the academic regulations changed about once a year, the teachers were often seekers like us, and the dormitory where I had lived for a year, was recently occupied by Stasi officers. I had chosen to study in Potsdam because of the parks and the *Neuen Palais* palace, and had imagined myself philosophizing under the colonnades. Instead, I found myself in the not so romantic suburb *Golm*, where they had banished the humanities departments, on a campus that was half village, half ex-Stasi university. You had to pass through a boom barrier to get onto the campus, like those used at military bases.

Of course, at any stage of your life you may ask yourself what you've missed. Even after earning your degree or finishing your dissertation. What might I have overlooked? Did I take advantage of every offer, every resource? Did I allow myself too little time to think, not gotten involved enough in political protests, didn't celebrate enough? Should I have been more attentive here, more careless there? What advice did I fail to notice, what glances, what caresses, because I drank too much, or too little?

As you know, looking ahead is Janus-faced. Without looking back, this extremely speculative affair would never lead to a vision of the best possible future: a well-paid job, glorious career, recognition and fulfillment, saving the planet, peace, requited love. Only with the help of hindsight, is it possible to direct your energy towards something you have so deeply longed for that it comes into being. Nonetheless, you may still end up in a village instead of a castle! Do I really always know what I am longing for? Is the matter settled with a bachelor's degree? Is my future firmly in sight after getting a master's degree? Is the path to my future clearly visible after earning a PhD?

Or, put differently: is what I have in mind, truly what I am longing for? Is there such a thing as a hierarchy of longing, arranged according to attainability? What desires have been tumbling behind my back, while I've been busy dealing with what's feasible? After getting my master's degree, I had considered a career in journalism because I knew my way around it, because I had an idea of how it could be done. I didn't know that with writing. I didn't dare imagine a life as a writer, even though I had already begun working on my first novel during my studies. Only by chance (because I was on the front porch, not the back porch?) did I realize that I had become a writer when I had to declare a profession on my first tax return.

Beneath all these considerations lies one of the major conundrums we face as humans: How should we live our life? - No, I don't intend to answer that question for you. That would be crazy. But even

if I could, the answer would apply only to me not to you. And anyway, the only sound advice a person can offer about life is this: follow your own instincts, use your own mind, draw your own conclusions. If we can agree on that, I can attempt to offer you a few ideas without infringing on your freedom, your individuality.

Freedom. Individuality. There we go again, circling back on terms that have taken a beating in recent times. On the one hand, we believe we know what they mean, on the other, a beautiful word like freedom has eroded to such a degree that even an FFP 2 mask poses a threat to it.

Every era fights its battles over how we should live— and live together— on the back of language. And it is precisely at the universities where these critical social agreements are being negotiated—who we want to be, are allowed to be, and who has a final say on the matter. Quite a few battles are ignited over nothing but words. The word “feminist,” for example, as hindsight shows us, was considered a dirty word until recently, and even back in 1938, Virginia Woolf wanted to burn it because it was “corrupt,” and only served to exclude and humiliate those it had once stood for. Our era also knows of words, which deprived of their former meaning serve only to denigrate. Even if such words need not be burned, they most certainly deserve a rest. And those who are caught in the barrage of such slurs and slanders, are the ones who ought to have a say about it. After all, and this goes without saying, I want to be referred to by whatever designation I have chosen for myself. Wasn't that always self-evident to those who complain that they are being censored today?

“Perhaps the natural must first become unnatural again in order to remain natural.” This sentence by the Austrian writer Ilse Aichinger also reminds us that language is more agile and mutable than we are in our habits.

Speaking of habits. Whining about censorship of speech, at a time when social media is spouting endless trash, makes me suspect that a lot of people have never had to ask themselves whether what they are saying is to their advantage, or rather a disadvantage to others. They have never had to pause and think. They are not used to carefully scrutinizing their comments. They must have lived in the enviable illusion of an ideology-free, virtually paradisiacal language, wherein—at least this is what is being suggested—people behaved reasonably, love was full of play, science was objective, and a person was allowed to speak their mind. Now all that is over and God...what? You're not even allowed anymore to say, „God dammit!” “God/dess dammit?”

It would never even cross my mind to say everything that crossed my mind. Not censorship, rather something as old-fashioned as courtesy and decency demand this of me. But I can imagine: a

person, who takes for granted that their words are good as gold surely will have a hard time when the sound of their own loud voice suddenly diminishes amidst a chorus of diverse others. The pathetic audacity of that person, who complains that freedom of expression has ended merely because their own sovereignty of opinion has expired.

As a society, we'll miss out on all that could be part of our lives, as long as we won't/don't hear the voices on the front porch.

Sometimes it is possible to make up for lost opportunities. But that requires attentiveness. Attentiveness also in dealing with language. With our habits. Habits evolve from laws, customs and traditions, the "dance round the mulberry tree," as Virginia Woolf sarcastically had put it. "Pelt the tree with laughter," she advised, and "Let us never cease from thinking - what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves? What are these ceremonies and why should we take part in them?"

Because freedom is also freedom from habits and customs that promote normality, a normality that is only normal because it is there, not because it is good.

Therefore stay alert, stay attentive. Don't hang a "do not disturb" sign in front of your views and opinions. And ask yourself over and over again, in the spirit of Woolf: what are these habits and do I want to participate in them. Also examine your own dogmas. Discover where your taboos are, where you draw the line, where you refuse to go, where you say: up to here and no further. And then: take the step. Take a step outside of yourself, for your eyes only. Dare to cross that red line. See what happens. Maybe it will make you recoil, frightened by your own impertinence, maybe your attempt will fail. But writing has taught me one thing: the first attempt is never enough. Just as for Ilse Aichinger the first word was never the right one, not even the second. Only the third, she found, having grown more merciful, could under certain circumstances be right.

But it is also possible that after crossing that personal line, you might grow more cheerful, serene. That something opens up. That you suddenly see the crows in the maple tree that you had never noticed before. That you notice a caress that had escaped you before. A love you were not aware of.

Because yes! Allow yourself to be loved. Not admired or *liked*, that empty stroke of the ego. No. Allow yourself to be loved, and that takes a quiet confidence in yourself, a self-confidence fed by the knowledge that you are woven into and held by a vast web of relationships. Not a single *I* with a single destiny, but rather in relationship, permeable to other human *I*'s, other living beings, other forms of consciousness; part of a vast entanglement that includes all lifeforms. The conventional *I*

of a binary-structured modern way of thinking, based on drawing boundaries and excluding others, has long obscured this view. And yes: love. Inundate yourself with love as generously as you can. Dream and wish the best for others. Be kind. Because nobody, I learned that in my psychology studies, is able to see themselves. To see yourself, you always need others.

Then, at the age of 60, if you happen to land on the front porch of your house and look up at the maple tree, and wonder what else you missed, if all went well, very little will come to mind, or, that's what I am hoping for myself, you will have the same blitheness and a similar sense of life's absurdity as Lucia Berlin, who at the end of her story concludes: no matter how she would have lived her life, even if she had lived it quite differently, if she had refrained from doing this, done that, kissed differently here, believed differently there, not cried over this, and laughed more over that, she would still have ended up in that house in Colorado.

“Can you believe it?” she writes. “My life would have ended up exactly as it has now, under the limestone rocks of Dakota Ridge, with crows.”

**Translated by Zaia Alexander**