



From JP Harpignies

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"JP is a Brooklyn, NY-based consultant, conference producer, copy-editor and writer. He is the author of four books: Political Ecosystems, Double Helix Hubris, Delusions of Normality, and most recently Animal Encounters; co-author of The Magic Carpet Ride; editor of the collection, Visionary Plant Consciousness; and associate editor of the first two Bioneers books: Ecological Medicine and Nature's Operating Instructions. A senior review team member for the Buckminster Fuller Challenge, he was formerly a program director at the New York Open Center and founder/co-producer of the Eco-Metropolis conference in NYC. JP also taught t'ai chi chuan in Brooklyn, NY for nearly 25 years."
(<https://bioneers.org/about/people/>)



It's now late October, and I just returned back home to Brooklyn, NY from the 30th Bioneers Conference (www.bioneers.org), a large annual eco and social justice conference/event held in San Rafael California, just north of San Francisco, that I've helped organize, program and produce since its inception three decades ago. It's a highly diverse and cross-disciplinary gathering that has long covered a wide range of topics from climate change activism to "green technologies" and biomimicry to agroecology and permaculture to sustainable watershed and land management to indigenous rights to eco-feminism to youth leadership to ethnobotany to complementary medicine to engaged arts, film and literature, etc., etc. It includes a contingent of several hundred youth activists we give scholarships to and a truly unique Indigenous Forum run by Native American organizers that brings together leaders from indigenous communities across the Americas.

Quite a few well-known figures have attended or contributed over the years, ranging from Jane Goodall to the writer Alice Walker to Hollywood actors Danny Glover and Leonardo di Caprio to playwright Eve Ensler (of *Vagina Monologues* fame) to several Cousteau descendants to John Densmore, the drummer of The Doors, to a range of elected officials, to mention only a few, but our emphasis is not on celebrities but on highlighting a wide range of promising projects and enterprises offering solutions to the current ecological crisis and related socio-political problems.

The last few years we were very lucky because large wildfires in the nearby region occurred just before or just after our event, and had our timing been just slightly different, we might have had to cancel it at the last minute, derailing the plans of thousands of people and probably dooming the existence of the Bioneers organization as well.

California is a beautiful place, but dangers that can erupt suddenly lurk beneath the surface at all times. While I was there just now, a small earthquake mildly shook the room I was in while I was reading in bed, and I almost missed my flight back home because the now still raging "Kincade Fire" (they name the big ones depending on their point of origin) closed roads in parts of Sonoma County that I had to drive through. Of course, that's a minor impediment, compared to folks who lose their homes and all they own, which has happened to a couple of people I know in that part of the world. Much of California and the American West are fire prone, but Climate Change and the expansion of human settlements into hitherto wild landscapes are radically exacerbating the problem.

A small anecdote: I've never lived in Belgium, as I seem to have been given at birth a life sentence of being a New Yorker till the end, but thanks to my father, I inherited Belgian citizenship, so I'm bi-national. I recently met the NY Belgian Consul General when I was on a panel at a cultural event at Rizzoli bookstore with a well known Belgian *dessinateur*, Pascal Lemaitre, who is a friend and has an apartment in my building when he's not in Belgium, and the Consul invited me to an event at the consulate to meet the Belgian Prime Minister, Charles Michel, who is about to become head of the European Council and who was here during the UN General Assembly meetings. I went and got my two minutes with Michel imploring him to refuse to sign any EU trade deals with Brazil while Bolsonaro was burning the Amazon. I have worked with several indigenous and non-indigenous activists from the Amazon and been to the Peruvian part of the Amazon Basin on several occasions, (not to mention that as a mammal and citizen of earth, I'd like to be able to have sufficient oxygen to breathe), so I felt really strongly about the matter. I had just been to the climate march led by Greta Thunberg down in lower Manhattan, so I felt like I just had to take my shot to lobby an actual decision maker. I don't often get to meet Prime Ministers and such. I'm sure it was totally pointless, but I gave it my best shot. It was strange to have my Belgian-ness reactivated. It reminded me of our late classmate, Michel Herckens, who sat next to me in class for many years, and whose father had worked at the NYC Belgian Consulate.

Anyway, as regards my daily life, I have now lived in this part of northern Brooklyn since 1971, and I like my little life: doing t'ai chi and biking around Prospect Park nearly every day, looking at the sunsets, going to events at the Brooklyn Museum and the Brooklyn Central Library (where the French Consulate recently sponsored a "Night of Philosophy" from dusk till dawn that drew thousands of local hipsters), going to free concerts in the aforementioned park in the summer and to a cool small bar/music club, Barbès, in Park Slope, owned by two French musicians, that has great music nearly every night, including an extraordinary African band, *Les Ambassadeurs du Mandingue*, led by a highly accomplished guitarist from Guinea, Mamady Kouyaté, every Wednesday night. The area is changing rapidly, becoming ever more gentrified, like so many other cities globally. If I hadn't bought an apartment decades ago, there is no way I could afford to live anywhere in NYC, since I have long worked in the aptly named "non-profit" sector. I hope to be able to keep living here for several more years, but should I no longer be able to work, my finances are such that I may have to sell my place and meager

possessions and move somewhere where the cost of life is much cheaper (Ecuador? Mexico? A trailer park in a small town in New Mexico? Chernobyl?)

So I really like my life, but I can't believe how old I've gotten. I don't feel old internally, but the mathematical facts can't be denied. It seemed to have happened so fast, and the years are racing by. Obviously, no matter how good I feel, the actuarial tables (and my knees and eyes) tell me that my life is more than three-quarters over, at best. I don't think I'm being morbid, just realistic. Ironically I've come to enjoy life much more on a daily basis in my later years than I did when I was younger when I was tormented by a slew of neuroses and ambitions, but that makes its rapidly approaching ending even less appealing. I guess the only good thing is that as much as I love being alive, I won't miss it when I'll be dead, because I tend not to believe in an afterlife, so a complete absence of cognition will make missing something impossible. In any case, no point in whining about it, since we're all in the same boat. Best to make the most of the time we have left while we still have some vigor and cognitive capacity.

As a longtime eco activist, the rapidity of climate change and the dramatic impoverishment of the web of life often fill me with great sadness. I have to admit I'm quite pessimistic about our species at this point and a bit glad I won't be around to see the worst of what's to come, but I also feel inspired by the young people now rising up to confront the challenge, especially that Joan of Arc-like Greta Thunberg, and by all the very positive work and projects I've seen over the years, so I think the wisest course is to certainly not bury one's head in the sand and to keep one's eyes open to the realities no matter how painful, but to just do what one can in one's own life to contribute to the common good despite the odds because cynicism and nihilism just aren't aesthetically satisfying approaches to life. Any conscious person probably can't help having a broken heart these days, but we should try to make them open broken hearts and to find as much joy and as many transcendental moments where we can along the way..."

J.P. Harpignies

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