

# A Long Overdue Thank You Letter

Oshee Eagleheart

2010

Dear Ursula,

I've been intending to write to you for ages, to thank you for the innumerable ways that your words have inspired, informed, supported, and challenged me over the past thirty-six years. Now that you're turning eighty, I think it's a good time to write that letter.

I first met you in 1973, in a room behind a little macrobiotic restaurant, called Peace Food, in West Berlin. I was twenty-one and in training to become a full-time worker for an Eastern spiritual organization. Our trainer would read to us from *The Wizard of Earthsea*, thinking, I suppose, that it was relevant to us as spiritual workers in training. It reminded me that I'd always known I was a wizard, as a faerie child talking to faeries in the woods of Britain and making sticks into magic wands. Of the many ideas in that book that resonated with my being, what stayed with me was the importance of the healing power of embracing and integrating one's own shadow—one's whole self—which became and remains central to my way of understanding myself and the world.

For the next six years, I was busy absorbing the teachings of and working for that organization and its Indian guru, and I don't recall coming across any more of your books until the organization sent me to the United States in 1979 to teach yoga and meditation. On my arrival in South Carolina, one of the first books I encountered was *The Dispossessed*. I'd always considered myself an anarchist, and you showed me a vision of what a world that practiced anarchist principles might look like. Once again, you offered no simplistic, Utopian solutions but always the complex questions. Years later, "The Day Before the Revolution" expanded my understanding of the possibilities of how radical social change might come about—how it might be much closer than we imagine.

Having rediscovered you, I picked up your books wherever I found them, on my travels all over North America in the 1980s, often devouring them without putting them down. The next two books of the (then) Earthsea trilogy, *The Tombs of Atuan* and *The Farthest Shore*, helped to deepen my understanding of the subtleties and potential dangers of working with spiritual power. Your bold questioning and challenging of many of the assumptions of the dominant culture provided a counter-balance to my little bubble of ideological certainty. The essential ideas that I gleaned from your work played a big part in preserving my core integrity and essential identity, so that when I emerged from the "cult" in 1991, I had a strong foundation on which to begin reconstructing my life.

By then, I'd read everything I could find that you'd written, and I have continued to read your work as it's published. Often, what you explore parallels my journeys of self-discovery and leads me to deeper and wider questions. This year, Lavinia is creating an opening for a conversation with my father, the classical scholar who used to read to us from Homer, about everyday life in the times of those heroic wars.

*Always Coming Home* is still the most complete and believable vision I've found of a practical, possible, sustainable culture. I practice re-reading it once a year and recommend it to everyone I know who's engaged in trying to build a saner world. I often dip into it for inspiration, as I move steadily closer to living sustainably and co-creating a movement for sustainable culture.

I became a practitioner of Deep Ecology and the Council of All Beings in the '90s, and once again, your work asked deeper questions and offered possibilities of more profound connections. The Word for World is Forest artic-

ulated the indigenous worldview of the interdependence of humans and “nature” in a way that I could immediately grok. As a lifelong tree lover, I draw inspiration from your profound love and understanding of the wisdom of trees and feel like we’re kindred spirits in yet another area of our lives. *Buffalo Gals* has been another of my favorite places to go for reminders of my Deep Ecological awareness, my ecological identity.

I’m not good at memorizing, but I have managed to memorize two of your poems, which capture two of my core beliefs. The first (from *Always Coming Home*) sums up the essence of Deep Ecology beautifully:

***A Poem Said with the Drum***

By Kulkunna of Chukulmas

*The hawk turns crying, gyring.*

*There is a tick stuck in my scalp.*

*If I soar with the hawk*

*I have to suck with the tick.*

*O hills of my Valley, you are too complicated!*

The second (from *Wild Oats and Fireweed*) articulates the essence of magic:

***Spell***

*An unknotting.*

*A disbraiment.*

*A great magic—*

*What is magic?*

*I release me.*

I carry both with me, to remind my friends and me of what’s essential.

When I started reconnecting with my wounded inner child, you offered me Tehanu, with its deeper wisdom about the profound relationships between wounds and healing power—and dragons. I identify strongly with being born in the year of the dragon and love your exploration of our ancient intertwined history as humans and dragons, both civilized and wild. Tehanu, too, I re-read regularly, always finding more as my experience deepens my ability to understand.

I’ve called myself a feminist ever since I discovered the word (in the ‘70s), and your writing has always challenged me to look more deeply at what feminism really means, in theory and in practice. You don’t hesitate to tell it like it is, with full awareness that many human males will not be able to hear what you’re saying—as you so powerfully and subtly point out in Tehanu. We have so far to go, and your voice keeps reminding us not to get complacent or believe them when they tell us how equal we are.

When I first read *The Left Hand of Darkness*, I called myself bisexual, and found support in your “thought experiment” of humans as essentially androgynous and bi-attractional. In recent years, since coming out as Transgender—which in my case means neither man nor woman—I keep returning to that book, and your various commentaries on it, looking to deepen my understanding of gender and sexuality. Thank you for keeping an open mind about gender-neutral pronouns, and, as always, being willing to take the discussion further. I imagine writing—stepping further through the door you opened—about a world where each person’s gender is unique, as is each person’s way of being sexually attracted and expressing that attraction. Perhaps you’ll write about it before I do.

Your suggestion that science fiction can be a kind of thought experiment has inspired me to create a thought experiment of my own. I call it the Gender Diversity Game. In the Game, we set up a playing field, divided side-ways and length-wise, into male/female and masculine/feminine. The field represents an imaginary culture where—despite their enormous biological and individual diversity, very much like ours—they structure their identities and institutions on the assumption that there are only two kinds of people: “boys/men” (masculine males) and “girls/women” (feminine females). You can imagine how it proceeds.

I’ve always been a dreamer, and, lately, have been learning to practice conscious dreaming and creating my life by manifesting my dreams. *The Lathe of Heaven* gives me deeper insight into that process and warns me to be very careful and precise about what I dream! Of course, it also reminds us to be cautious about imposing simplistic solutions on complex (read: living) situations.

For extended periods of my adult life I’ve lived in various kinds of intentional communities, and many of your stories—Always Coming Home, of course—have inspired and informed us. I’m thinking particularly of *Vaster than Empires and More Slow*, which so accurately and hilariously portrays the interactions within groups of “crazy” characters who dare to explore the far reaches of the social universe in search of workable ways of living. I’m about to embark on yet another journey into that realm and am taking your books with me as essential reading.

Most recently, as I become more polyamorous in practice, I’ve rediscovered that you’ve already been there too (of course) and have a fresh perspective to offer. The world you describe in *Mountain Ways* expresses my current situation almost exactly—reversed, of course, as is so often your way of pointing things out to us. (In twenty-first-century North America, people judge me for not being a serial monogamist, not for being the wrong kind of polyamorous.) Still, the questions you raise, of how to stay true to oneself and the people one loves in the face of social customs and taboos, applies.

Now, as a budding writer, sometimes doubting whether what I have to write will make any difference in the world, I only have to remember what a huge difference your words have made in the life of this reader, for all my doubts to be dispelled.

I hope you’ll stick around for quite a while yet and keep challenging us and shaking us out of our complacency. I’ll miss your fresh words when you’re no longer writing, and I’ll be surprised if I don’t keep hearing your voice, reminding me to ask the deeper questions and challenge all the assumptions of the old culture.

All of what I’ve written could really fit into two words: “Thank you.”

# fifth Estate

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