donating = loving

For 15 years, I have been spending hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars each month to keep *Brain Pickings* going. It has remained free and ad-free and alive thanks to patronage from readers. I have no staff, no interns, no assistant — a thoroughly one-woman labor of love that is also my life and my livelihood. If this labor makes your life more livable in any way, please consider aiding its sustenance with a donation. Your support makes all the difference.

MONTHLY DONATION

♥ $3 / month
♥ $5 / month
♥ $7 / month
♥ $10 / month
♥ $25 / month

START NOW

ONE-TIME DONATION

You can also become a spontaneous supporter with a one-time donation in any amount:

GIVE NOW

BITCOIN DONATION

Partial to Bitcoin? You can beam some bit-love my way:
197usDS6AsL9wDKxtGM6xaWjmR5ejgqem7

Need to cancel a recurring donation? Go here.

archives

SEARCH GO

browse by subject

SURPRISE ME

sunday newsletter

Brain Pickings has a free Sunday digest of the week's most interesting and inspiring articles across art, science, philosophy, creativity, children's

Gardening as Resistance: Notes on Building Paradise

> "Can you plant a garden to stop a war? It depends how you think about time. It depends what you think a seed does, if it's tossed into fertile soil."

BY MARIA POPOVA

"The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end… Here is the Amen beyond the prayer," Derek Jarman wrote as he grieved his dying friends, faced his own death, and contemplated art, mortality, and resistance while planting a garden between an old lighthouse and a new nuclear plant on a barren shingled shore.

Jarman is one of the artists whom **Olivia Laing** profiles and celebrates in ***Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency*** (*public library*) — her superb collection of meditations on art, activism, and our search for meaning, drawing on the lives of artists whose vision has changed the way we see the world, ourselves, and others.

Red poppy from *A Curious Herbal* by Elizabeth Blackwell, 1737. (Available as a print and as a face mask benefitting The Nature Conservancy.)

books, and other strands of our search for truth, beauty, and meaning. Here's an example. Like? Claim yours:

Name

Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

midweek newsletter

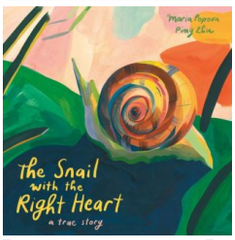
Also: Because *Brain Pickings* is in its fifteenth year and because I write primarily about ideas of a timeless character, I have decided to plunge into my vast archive every Wednesday and choose from the thousands of essays one worth resurfacing and resavoring. Subscribe to this free midweek pick-me-up for heart, mind, and spirit below — it is separate from the standard Sunday digest of new pieces:

Name

Email Address

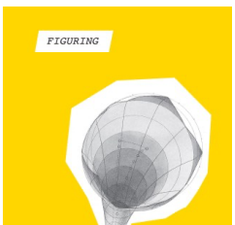
SUBSCRIBE

also



The Snail with the Right Heart: A True Story

The Universe in Verse



Laing's Jarman-fomented essay, titled "Paradise," begins with the question of whether gardening is a form of art and ends with the question of whether art is a form of resistance — a necessary tool for building the Garden of Eden we imagine a flourishing society to be.

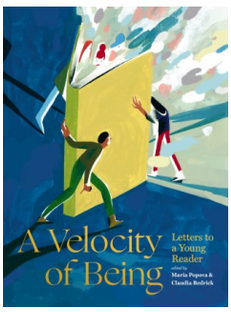
She writes:

> Gardening situates you in a different kind of time, the antithesis of the agitating present of social media. Time becomes circular, not chronological; minutes stretch into hours; some actions don't bear fruit for decades. The gardener is not immune to attrition and loss, but is daily confronted by the ongoing good news of fecundity. A peony returns, alien pink shoots thrusting from bare soil. The fennel self-seeds; there is an abundance of cosmos out of nowhere.

To bridge Laing's two questions, one must somehow reconcile these two temporal models: linear time, which the Greek called *chronos* and along which we plot the vector of progress, and cyclical time, or *kairos*, which is the time of gardens and, Laing intimates, the time of societies. We long for the assurance of steady progression, yet all around us the rest of nature churns in cycles. How do the cicadas know when to awake from their seventeen-year slumbers and rise up by the billions to make new life that will in turn repeat the cycle? And the migratory birds, "how can they know that it's time to go?," as Nina Simone asked in her serenade to time — Nina Simone, who also chose to cover Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn! (To Everything There Is a Season)" and who gave all she had to a movement the central concerns of which have returned a life-season later with redoubled urgency, its fruits only just beginning to ripen in our lifetime.

Therein lies the paradox — how do we practice resistance if time is the substance we are made of, as Borges so timelessly observed, and yet we live suspended between these two parallel versions of time as we try to build paradise?

Figuring



A Velocity of Being

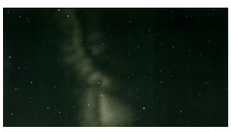
art

sounds

bites

bookshelf

favorite reads



Essential Life-Learnings from 14 Years of Brain Pickings

Favorite Books of 2020

Singularity: Marie Howe's Ode to Stephen Hawking, Our Cosmic Belonging, and the Meaning of Home, in a Stunning Animated Short Film

The Cosmic Miracle of Trees: Astronaut Leland Melvin Reads Pablo Neruda's Love Letter to Earth's Forests

How Kepler Invented Science Fiction and Defended His Mother in a Witchcraft Trial While Revolutionizing Our

Fig from *A Curious Herbal* by Elizabeth Blackwell, 1737. (Available as a print and as a face mask, benefitting The Nature Conservancy.)

"Resistance" has always been a funny word to me — one without direct translation in my native Bulgarian, in this particular context of constructive social change. It contours something necessary but not sufficient — while ennobling and empowering in its implication of defying wrongness, it limits its own power by ending at what is to be eradicated, without indication of what is to be grown in its place and how. In this respect, the resistance approach to human nature (and the consensual collective byproduct of human natures we call society) is like the pesticide approach to nature.

"Resistance" is a word especially limited by the elemental fact that there are certain things simply beyond the reach of resistance, impervious to our passions and protestations — spacetime, gravity, the fundamental laws that gave rise to our existence and will eventually return us to the stardust of which we are made. Your face will sag and your spine will bend under the twin assault of gravity and time, and so will mine, until our atoms disband altogether to become food for the worm and fertilizer for the mycelial wonderland from which bluebells will rise some future spring.

None of this we can resist.

But maybe — and that is what redeems and consecrates our finite human lives and our limited powers — within those parameters, there is space enough and spirit enough to resist what is poisonous to the ideological soil we call culture and persist in planting, for as long as we have to live and with as much generosity as we have to give, something lush and beautiful. That we might never live to see it bloom might just be okay. To have planted the seeds is satisfaction enough worth living for.

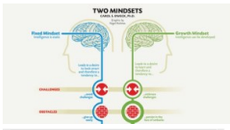
Hare-bell from *The Moral of Flowers* by Rebecca Hey, 1833. (Available as a print.)

Laing lands in a kindred place. A century and a half after Thoreau contemplated the long cycles of social change and an increment after Zadie Smith reminded us that "progress is never permanent, will always be threatened, must be redoubled, restated

Understanding of the Universe

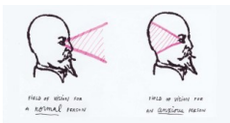
Emily Dickinson's Electric Love Letters to Susan Gilbert

Rebecca Solnit's Lovely Letter to Children About How Books Solace, Empower, and Transform Us



Fixed vs. Growth: The Two Basic Mindsets That Shape Our Lives

In Praise of the Telescopic Perspective: A Reflection on Living Through Turbulent Times



A Stoic's Key to Peace of Mind: Seneca on the Antidote to Anxiety

The Courage to Be Yourself: E.E. Cummings on Art, Life, and Being Unafraid to Feel

The Writing of "Silent Spring": Rachel Carson and the Culture-Shifting Courage to Speak Inconvenient Truth to Power

and reimagined if it is to survive," Laing writes after a pilgrimage to Derek Jarman's grave:

> Is art resistance? Can you plant a garden to stop a war? It depends how you think about time. It depends what you think a seed does, if it's tossed into fertile soil. But it seems to me that whatever else you do, it's worth tending to paradise, however you define it and wherever it arises.

The arc of the moral universe might not be so different from that of the stem bent with bluebells tolling their vernal reminder that change comes in cycles. Every arc, after all, is but a segment of a circle. What it takes to draw our share of it with a steady hand as we try "widening our circles of compassion" without the assurance of immediate results — that is the question we each answer with our lives.

Poet and gardener Ross Gay comes closest to my own answer in his life-tested conviction that time spent gardening is "an exercise in supreme attentiveness." As I roll in my palm six large seedpods of sea kale — a neglected flowering wonder I discovered on the pages of Derek Jarman's journal — and thumb them into the moist Brooklyn soil where they may or may not sprout, I find more and more that attention is the elemental unit of time. Each moment we are fully paying attention is an atom of eternity. The quality of our attention measures the quantity of our aliveness — our sole generator of resistance and persistence.

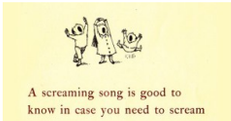
This I know to be true: What will survive of us are shoreless seeds and stardust.

Sea kale (*Crambe maritima*) by Carl Axel Mangus Lindman, 1901. (Restored archival art, available as a print benefitting The Nature Conservancy.)

Complement with the poetic neurologist Oliver Sacks on the healing power of gardens, then revisit Laing on life, loss, and the wisdom of rivers.

Timeless Advice on Writing: The Collected Wisdom of Great Writers

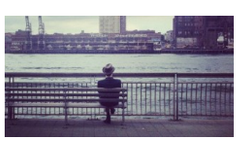
A Rap on Race: Margaret Mead and James Baldwin's Rare Conversation on Forgiveness and the Difference Between Guilt and Responsibility



The Science of Stress and How Our Emotions Affect Our Susceptibility to Burnout and Disease

Mary Oliver on What Attention Really Means and Her Moving Elegy for Her Soul Mate

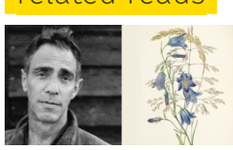
Rebecca Solnit on Hope in Dark Times, Resisting the Defeatism of Easy Despair, and What Victory Really Means for Movements of Social Change



The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone

SEE MORE

related reads



Growing Through Grief: Derek Jarman on Gardening as Creative Redemption, Consecration of Time, and Training Ground for Presence

donating = loving

For 15 years, I have been spending hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars each month to keep *Brain Pickings* going. It has remained free and ad-free and alive thanks to patronage from readers. I have no staff, no interns, no assistant — a thoroughly one-woman labor of love that is also my life and my livelihood. If this labor makes your life more livable in any way, please consider aiding its sustenance with a donation. Your support makes all the difference.

MONTHLY DONATION

- ♥ $3 / month
- ♥ $5 / month
- ♥ $7 / month
- ♥ $10 / month
- ♥ $25 / month

START NOW

ONE-TIME DONATION

You can also become a spontaneous supporter with a one-time donation in any amount:

GIVE NOW

BITCOIN DONATION

Partial to Bitcoin? You can beam some bit-love my way:
197usDS6AsL9wDKxtGM6xaWjmR5ejgqem7

sunday newsletter

Brain Pickings has a free Sunday digest of the week's most interesting and inspiring articles across art, science, philosophy, creativity, children's books, and other strands of our search for truth, beauty, and meaning. Here's an example. Like? Claim yours:

Name | Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

midweek newsletter

Also: Because *Brain Pickings* is in its fifteenth year and because I write primarily about ideas of a timeless character, I have decided to plunge into my vast archive every Wednesday and choose from the thousands of essays one worth resurfacing and resavoring. Subscribe to this free midweek pick-me-up for heart, mind, and spirit below — it is separate from the standard Sunday digest of new pieces:

Name | Email Address

SUBSCRIBE

PRINT ARTICLE

EMAIL ARTICLE

SHARE ARTICLE

Tweet | Share 4.7K | Pocket 1,762

FILED UNDER

ART | BOOKS | CULTURE | DEREK JARMAN | OLIVIA LAING | POLITICS

Art and the Human Spirit: Olivia Laing on What the Lives of Great Artists Reveal About Vulnerability, Love, Loneliness, Resistance, and Our Search for Meaning

The Secret of Happiness: Bronson Alcott on Gardening and Genius

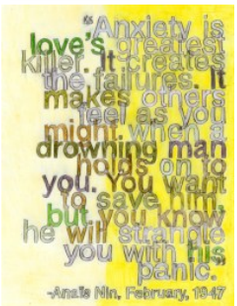
labors of love

Famous Writers' Sleep Habits vs. Literary Productivity, Visualized

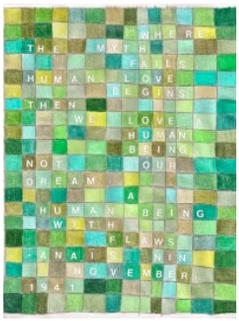
7 Life-Learnings from 7 Years of Brain Pickings, Illustrated

Anaïs Nin on Love, Hand-Lettered by

Debbie Millman



Anaïs Nin on Real Love, Illustrated by Debbie Millman



Susan Sontag on Love: Illustrated Diary Excerpts

Susan Sontag on Art: Illustrated Diary Excerpts

Albert Camus on Happiness and Love, Illustrated by Wendy MacNaughton

The Holstee Manifesto

The Silent Music of the Mind: Remembering Oliver Sacks

Brain P
commi
percen

ickings participates in
ssions by linking to A
tage of its price, which

the Amazon Services LI
mazon. In more human
n goes straight back into

LC Associates Program,
terms, this means that
my own colossal biblio

an affiliate advertisin
whenever you buy a b
expenses. Privacy pol

g program designed to
ook on Amazon from a
icy.

provide a means for site

link on here, I receive a

s to earn
small