

MEDUSA'S CURSE / The Necessity of Art to the Climate Struggles

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Because I am a literary writer, writing about planetary emergencies, people often ask me, What is the importance of the arts in these struggles? I turn to Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth century German philosopher.

“We have art in order not to die of the truth,” he wrote. . . .

What is this lethal truth, the truth that break our hearts, sap our spirits, and turn us to stone? This fact: that “unless we act immediately, by the time our children are middle-aged, the life-supporting systems of the planet will be damaged beyond repair.”

How can art save us in the face of those truths?

Do you remember Medusa, the monstrous woman in Greek mythology? Medusa was a Gorgon, with such a terrifying face that no mortal could gaze upon it without dying – the reptilian face, the poisonous hair dripping snakes. A person who looked straight at her would turn to stone.

And isn't this the danger, that when people look straight into the face of the desperate truths of our time, they are turned to stone? Their hearts are hardened. They are unable to act. Joyless, inhumane, immobilized, they freeze into business-as-usual, as if they had no choice.

Enter the hero Perseus, who carried (along with his winged shoes and his magic scythe), a shining, reflective shield. When he held the shield up and caught Medusa's horrific image, here was the lethal truth of her -- transformed, but *not* transformed. Revealed, but not represented. Revealed. Revealed! And Perseus, seeing her in an entirely new way, faced her reflection boldly, and cut off her head.

What is this reflective shield that can show us the danger without turning us to stone? What can replace paralyzing fear with a new vision of what is beautiful and possible? What can break the bonds of lies and denial?

The answer, of course, is art, this magic reflective shield. Rachelle has taught me the power of music. She sat at the piano and taught me about the hollow chords of despair, the augmented fourth of yearning, the perilous transitions from dissonance to consonance. In a time of climate change and ecological collapse, music can open our hearts without breaking them. Music allows us to see hard truths without being destroyed by them, but rather lifted and heartened. That is our hope tonight.

Rachelle, will you tell us about the music?