



# TRANSCENDING EGOISM IN AN ECOLOGICAL FUTURE

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. TERRY HARPOLD

We spoke with Dr. Terry Harpold, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Florida, about his work exploring stories of environmental crisis and climate change in science fiction literature and film, and through UF's Imagining Climate Change initiative (<https://imagining-climate.clas.ufl.edu>), which he directs. His research, teaching, and activism reflect a humanities-based approach to understanding the natural world and the role(s) humans might play in it to promote a better future for all species.

**“TO SURRENDER HUMAN PRIVILEGE DOESN'T DIMINISH HUMANITY.”**

Dr. Harpold discussed the relationship between humans and our zoological kin—other animals—citing it as a fundamental point of contention in the modern world and a direct cause of accelerating ecological degradation, biodiversity collapse, and species extinction. He described humanity's earliest relationships with animals as a flattened hierarchy, in which we humans saw ourselves as equal to—if not in some ways less than—our zoological counterparts. Much of our modern sense that we stand apart from other species can be attributed, he observed, to the rise of industrialization. Dr. Harpold explained how our newfound ability to reshape and control natural landscapes led to a conviction that we are in some way irreducibly different from other species and thus we deserve the power that we unthinkingly exert over them. The sophistication of our language is perhaps the only aspect of our species that distinguishes humans from other animals, he suggested, and even that is unclear: the symbol-making and communication skills of other animals are more complex than humans once believed. In any case, those aspects of other animals' culture are as sophisticated as they need them to be in order to thrive under their own terms. (He wondered aloud if perhaps our culture is not really as up to that task as we think.) It is increasingly clear, he observed, that most practices that humans used to claim as uniquely ours—for example, toolmaking, artistic expression, cultural memory—are also aspects of the lives of nonhuman animals. That we still refuse to see this enables humans to perpetuate, unreflectingly, unjust exertions of power over other inhabitants of the natural world, he added, because we reject their capacity for self-definition. This has altered our relationship with the environment;

**“WHAT IS THE WORLD YOU WANT TO LIVE IN?”**

our failure to recognize how the natural world shapes us much as it shapes any other species, and that this happens in feedback cycles of invention and self-creation, robs us of more vital, exuberant, bidirectional connections to the world; it impoverishes our imaginations. One consequence of this is an instrumentalist and extractivist mindset, in which humans see the world as primarily a collection of resources useful towards specific ends for us, and not as a wild and vigorous, spirited reality that operates also on its own terms, including but also independent of our interests.

**“BECAUSE WE INSISTED SO MUCH THAT WE STAND APART, IT MADE IT EASY FOR US TO CRUELLY SEPARATE OURSELVES FROM OTHERS, AND THEN FROM EACH OTHER.”**

Dr. Harpold connected these ideas to a larger commentary on how best to consider the climate crisis from the perspective of the humanities. He reflected on the ways in which he has, over time, changed his approach to our collective ecological futures. Recalling how both he and his students were initially terrified by climate fiction plots that project only terrible worlds of deprivation and anguish, Dr. Harpold has shifted to seeking out stories of surviving and thriving: worlds in which, he said, there may be less to share with others but in which it is possible share more equitably and joyfully, and to honor the diversity and beauty that includes us all. He described his process of looking for stories of resilience, hope, and love to reframe alarming climate narratives with his students in honest but also generative ways. He emphasized the importance of overcoming the human ego when we imagine where we are headed in this century and beyond: a variety of futures is still possible, some will be hard—probably very hard—and some will be less hard, he said. But we must first surrender the dangerous conviction that every future will be about *us*.

**“THERE'S STILL A BEAUTY IN A WORLD WITHOUT US.”**

When asked how to move forward with these ideas, Dr. Harpold suggested that all people could actively give back to the natural landscape, reframe their relationships with the more-than-human world, and “enjoy the experience of the world more honestly and more consciously.” Imagining futures equal to the worlds that can still be, he said, involves committing to more just, equitable, compassionate, and diverse societies for all living beings. He commented that “simply imagining that there will be a future, I think, is one of the most important things that I and my colleagues at this university can do with our beautiful, young, vital students, who are longing for reasons to hope and act on hope. Many in our time are telling them that hope is misguided, that there won't be a future worth striving for, that it will only be one of sacrifice and despair. We must take it upon ourselves to help them see that they have the power to reimagine and to recreate a place for humanity within more-than-human worlds in which everyone might live as honorably and fully as possible.”