

# WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD NOW!: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE BOONE

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Friendship, like writing, is relational, a cast of “I” and “You” in multiple. For Bruce Boone and Bob Glück, two friends in writing and in life, the relational is social and spectral, performed on pages and on walks, on phones and in drafts. Thanks to Bob, my friend, I met Bruce now also my friend. Their writing makes my writing along with the work of many of my other friends viable, livable, that is, another cast of characters in a drama both local and elsewhere. If friendship is elegiac, “an anguished apprehension of mourning” (Derrida), then Bob and Bruce and Bob’s and Bruce’s writing propose a way, both spectrally and socially, to tolerate the grief and perils of living together. And more. For all the relational and personal, there is something happy about a friendship that restricts the intimate and acquisitive satisfactions, that precipitates the pleasure of illegibility and incoherence, that is, the intimacy of renouncing content or argument for movement, a rhythm that animates but doesn’t resolve. We become a self that remains or emerges when contents are stripped away, leaving the coming and going, the yes and the no, always possible and never decided. This oscillation is the rhythm of friendship, summoned and denied, and this, and much else, I have learned in my walks, spectrally and socially, with Bruce and Bob.

On a Tuesday in March, Bruce and I go to the De Young Museum in Golden Gate Park to have lunch and look at Dutch paintings. We go with our love and with our biases. He’s never liked Ruisdael and I have an issue with Hals. We sit in the museum café with the lollypop light fixtures hanging from

the ceiling. He says he's feeling dread about having to do the interview and I ask why. Bruce doesn't want to talk about contemporary writing. I say I don't either. What I want is to talk about whatever Bruce is interested in, the quality of his attention. So we agree to talk while I jot down notes and then afterward I would transcribe some of the notes and send them to him as prompts to which he could then respond. Our conversation ranges around an array of topics including the art in Agrippa's villa, online dating, Latin elegy, vegetal life and entomology, and of course we talk about our dear friend Bob. We agree to work on a translation together of Lucretius's poetry in the not too distance future. At the exhibit, we admire the self-portrait of Rembrandt at age 23. He likes his nose; I want to tussle his locks. Bruce ventriloquizes some of the characters, really gets inside their heads. The centerpiece, Vermeer's "Girl with the Pearl Earring," is something to behold. The rich fabrics, the head dress seem to be playing at something exotic. I find the head itself disturbing, twisting too far around; Linda Blaire's head spinning around and around and her demon voice in *The Exorcist*. Bruce thinks it has something to do with the darkness behind her. Eerie. On arriving home, very satisfied with my afternoon with Bruce, I find it harder than I had thought it would be to render notes into evocative writing prompts primarily because in the best way everything feels so interwoven that to parse things out seems counter to the intention, but I come up with a handful and then Bruce writes back with such astonishing wisdom, humor and clarity. Please keep reading—the best is ahead.

**JOCELYN SAIDENBERG:** How have different communities, such as New Narrative writers and the Marxist and Theory Group at St. Cloud, intersected with your commitments to issues of social justice and your engagements with writing?

**BRUCE BOONE:** My take on New Narrative probably came from fierce identity politics. (Earlier though, there was already a strong sense of social justice that my commitment to Catholicism in Vatican II years gave me). At first this was largely inchoate—or else just gay politics. Then during the St. Cloud Marxist Summer Institute when I started mixing with activists of other identities, I realized there couldn't be a robustly radical gay movement without solidarity with other gender and ethic movements, and this, knitted with a strong left orientation, lead me to writing a short pamphlet to this

effect. A little later this led Steve Abbott and myself (then joined by Robert Glück and others) to concoct the idea of a Left/Write Conference—to be able to be a platform for solidarity among the various local groups of ethnic/gender/sexual writers—and this coming at a time when many of these groups were not just independent of each other but even at odds with some or all of the others. What eventuated in my opinion was a writing, *New Narrative*, that would reflect some of these inter-political trends, at least in our own writerly generation, if not in others.

**JS:** How to hold these two truths: 1. To live as completely as possible and to die as completely as possible and 2. Jamie, your partner of many decades, saying in the weeks before his death: “Boone, when you die, too, I am going to find you, even if I have to sniff you out.”

**BB:** Your question here must refer to the Zen Master Dogen quote—his exhortation to live life as completely as possible and to die the same way, as completely as possible. What else would be possible if you are living in the moment? And can a real Buddhist do otherwise? When questions from the Buddha’s students went to the reality or non-reality of an afterlife, Buddha immediately joked or diverted these questions. (When Richard Baker and his other dharma-heirs asked Suzuki-roshi, as the latter was dying, if there was an after life—roshi simply drew the traditional Buddhist circle in the air, the enso, meaning enlightenment—and let it go at that.)

If in meditation you realize the non-reality of a self, of any self, isn’t the whole question moot? There’s no entity in you that could continue on after your life finishes. Still, traces of the original Buddhist teaching remain, borrowed from Vedic religion. Reincarnation is held by some Zen monks while there are also others who continue to think that the very idea of afterlife contradicts the admonition to live in the moment. In other words it’s just needless and counterproductive speculation.

Dogen’s monition to live completely your life and die completely your death is much more about living in the moment than about any denigrating of anyone’s belief in any afterlife, or reincarnation for that matter, another birth after death. And the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* specifies, if you care to believe this, that there is a specific interval of time (is it 90 days as I seem to recall?)

that must elapse after you die before you're given the choice of another birth—unless of course, if you're that special one among a trillion trillion people who happens to reach nirvana and thus is not compelled to undergo another round of the “dhuka” or suffering or dissatisfaction that equates to our life as living beings. Though that's another story and won't apply to me, I don't think.

Now it's true: lately I've started to hold alternate views about life after life. Or should I say entertain them—or else that they entertain me? If we are waves in an ocean continuously changing its waves, then in timeless states (or eternity), aren't all waves that the ocean configures and then throws back to itself, present simultaneously? And just as on a CD you may pick, say, track nine out of fourteen tracks to listen to, does this mean the other thirteen tracks don't remain just as they are, just because of not being played? You may finish with track nine and decide to play track one—who cares? So that sequencing them means you are in time. If they are simultaneous, then that is a good figure to indicate timelessness. And considering this figure to represent my current feelings, you might say I very much believe Jamie and I will see each other again.

It used to be, in general, I'd disbelieve Jamie's words about meeting again and believe his promise only at special times—seeing certain photos of him that suddenly would move me—and then, though only during the time I was being moved, I'd think it was possible for us to see each other again. In other words, schizophrenia. Which bothered me a little, though I confess not too much.

Things have changed recently (in part from a review of the scientific literature on Near Death Experience—remarkably echoing Plato's so called myth of Er in *The Republic* by the way). I've stopped being as schizophrenic. Where I used to think that any form of afterlife at all was just pabulum, a fairy-tale only children could believe, now I think it's more how you define it. I guess I think I will meet up with Jamie after my death, though we'll both be “reconfigured” in some basic way that will put the emphasis more on the realized commonality we have with each other and all being than our individual relationship.

Grad school skepticism—in which I took such pride!—has been effaced and now I am one of the masses I used to despise, the superstitious ones who actually have the stupidity to believe in (at least some form of) an afterlife. Is this pie in the sky? Or because I have a more nuanced view does that change it? You can make up your own minds on that.

**JS:** Tell me about the value of sitting meditation, interruptions, going fishing, as a means towards breaking one's mind from normal discursive functions.

**BB:** What's the value of meditation and its interruptions? I'd rather use the word "practice." What's the value of "practice" as Zen tradition says. The truest view is dual. Interruptions continue to sustain the practice though you may be distracted. Sitting on a cushion is only a sort of borderless center out of which your practice continues—whether you realize it or not. Alternatively everything is practice even when you are breaking with practice. This might be something only your unconscious realizes as you are on a tear of hysteria, anger, lust, or whatever. It's there, coming thru the anger, hysteria, etc., and though perhaps only your body realizes this, your mind more and more can too. This shouldn't be understood cryptically or as a paradox. It's simply what happens.

It may be that only your body's aware the *sesshin* still continues, but it does. Same with discursive functions—practice subtends discursive thought as much as it does hearing the doorbell and telephone and preparing yourself to be present to the other person as you get up to answer or open the door. Or when you have sex. Doesn't matter. Practice is unending, never stops. Or so I think.

Enough?

**JS:** Never! Please tell me about the virtues and values of blabbing. "You're not a lover till you blab about it" as Bob writes in *Jack the Modernist*. Is gossip a community function? If you blab enough and it makes the rounds, then it either firms up or destroys the community.

**BB:** Mmmm. Gossip and community, an interesting question. You're right to ask about possible deleterious consequences of blabbing/gossip, since there obviously are possibilities of fracturing the community if you badmouth someone by passing on to others some funny but nasty thing

that that person did. But then, it's possible that even in the community's negative reactions to a person gossiped about there can be a strengthening of community ties. What if for instance the community's been sort of dormant, for some time, and here there comes along this chain of nasty secrets about someone, and though fracturing may or may not result to the community, there may also be kind of re-awakening of a currently non-functioning community. In that case there's a mix of good and bad.

In Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of community, for example, the effort to recognize the positive in community and exclude the negative takes this (following) form. Let there be community, but let it be one that is "désœuvrée" (multiple translations and meanings applying here, from "broken down" to "unemployed" or "working badly" or "out of commission" as I think could be said of it.) And how exactly might you have such a community? One French answer has been to construct community along the lines of a human-body cell—with a nucleus surrounded by protoplasm. In this case that would mean to install at the very heart of a homogeneous protoplasm an alien or foreign nucleus (which apparently in the account of the evolution of things into cells is how things actually did happen: something essentially foreign to the protoplasm migrated in—and just stayed). Think of antiquity when there were kings, tyrants, emperors, etc., either in the West or in Islam. Many Roman emperors, and following them Byzantine-Romans, brought in ethnically different (taller, stronger, blue-eyed) Celts or Slavs to serve as an imperial bodyguard caste. Since they were so different from the tyrant's population at large, they were often hated or at least suspected by them. And just as this was particularly true in Byzantium, it happened as well with the successor rulers of the Byzantine regions. The Sultan's personal protective force, was always taken from captured blue-eyed fair-skinned Slavs, ensuring his safety by creating an "alien-ness" around him and at the heart of the otherwise homogeneous populations.

And you can extrapolate from ethnic possibilities to other ones yourself, in considering how to apply, if you like, this particular French solution to the dual need for, and danger from, the community.

**JS:** What role has gossip played in a specific writing project, whether thematically or otherwise?

**BB:** Robert Glück has already talked about the role of gossip in his essay “Long Note on New Narrative,” where he cites a crucial Benjamin essay tying in the exchange of gossip and community formation. As for myself I could cite a particular use of gossip by me in a story called “The Truth about Ted.” Really though this story is gossip within gossip, story within a story. The frame story is phone conversations between Bob and me: wherein I retell to him the latest about telephone speculations between me and my ex-boyfriend and his friends: about the sexual identity of a friend of his. First the phone lines buzz with dissections of the signs or lack of them, in this particular friend, of being gay or straight. “Is he or isn’t he?” True or false? “All tea, no shade?” as today’s community asks. The friend in question seems very gay but professes to be straight. Though what if this is just because he hasn’t yet come out? These and other urgent questions form our gossips. In one crucial development of this story the ambiguous friend is introduced to another and very out friend of my ex’s. And we all, me, my ex, my ex’s friends, we all phone each other to weigh in on the issue, citing chapter and verse. And in the meta-text going on in this story meantime, I’m phone-gossiping with Bob the whole time about these other conversations, as a kind of entertainment, and because certainly a big part of the friendship-function for Bob and me has always been trading gossip.

Consciousness of my theoretical basis for this story in Walter Benjamin’s theories didn’t keep me from wondering—why muck up trash by quoting theory? Opposing the way gossip is used in a more mixed way in another piece of writing of mine, *Century of Clouds*, I thought this particular story would fail if the language wasn’t pretty trashy gay gossip. I mean kind of trailer park. (And regarding the formation of family-life, isn’t gossip crucial to constituting this community too, family, for that matter?) But there’s another option: use theory in a trashy way: like Chris Kraus in her modern classic *I LOVE DICK*, where her constant theory citing is B-movie style. See? There are options. Including mixing low trash and high, like Chris does.

**JS:** You mentioned Wagner’s warning: “Don’t go into the earth to get metals!” and the lessons to be learned from cultures on the far side of monotheism. What’s the difference between entomology and etymology, and what do the bugs have to teach us?

**BB:** Are they in fact identical as your humor suggests—at some level? They are indeed, would be my answer, at least considered from the viewpoint

of minimalism: things that are small. With one you break apart words to the smallest components or roots, and with the other do you not at least approach minimalist forms of fauna (without actually touching bedrock-single-cell life though!), such as bugs and other small life-forms.

Let's go from strength to strength, as the Psalmist advises! Bugs relate to Japan in this way. From somewhere mid-last-century or a little later right up to the Dot.com crash (2000 CE) bug-science (as I like to name it instead of entomology) really lagged in the west for reasons nobody could understand—but Japan broke barrier after barrier in new bug-discoveries undreamed of here in the West! The question is—why? This question was answered at least for me in a later Jeremy Tarmer book, the one wherein he undertook to find out if science excluded any search for evidence of mind at work in the tiniest beings, from bugs on down, even to single-cell slime molds for instance. What is amazing now is that according to testimony obtained by Tarmer in personal conference and correspondence with the greatest Japanese bug (and lower-than-bug) scientists, the scientific Japanese approach was always quite different from that of the objectivizing and “matter-obsessed” western scientists of the period so that when Japanese scientists during these years really broke all barriers in advancing scientific knowledge in their entomologist fields, western scientists of course had to ask why?

As Gertrude Stein said, “After the flowers of friendship faded, friendship faded”—in other words in some key areas in life—such as love or belief—there may indeed be a significant leap as you abandon a love before you come to abandoning all the different and various ATTITUDES that this love begot in you. As this is true in faith-based communities (Buddhism, Catholicism), you can say that Stein noted a similar gap in the time between beginning loss of faith, in another person or in your religion, and the persistence of attitudes promoted by faith. That is to say, after the flowers of friendship faded, friendship faded. There is a certain “might-to-could” worldview that has remained for some lengthy time. To explain this turn of phrase, “might-to-could” is a lovely idiom belonging to at least poor whites in the southwest of this country, as in Jamie's family in Carlsbad, NM. It's a sort of cowboy-twang-cum-southern locution, as I found out during any number of our many trips together to visit his family and extended family



there, which is where I first came upon this regional phraseology: no other expression in English comes close to expressing what I want to say here.

If bugs have mind (and all Buddhists know mind coextends everything that is) then what? More respect for the natural world—a respect moreover that had lead the Japanese scientists in the last decades of the last century and more—to become the vanguard national science in the entomology field. No surprise there, yes? “Might-to-could” means all of creation has got to have consciousness to one degree or another.

This leads us to the idea of a planetary recycling or repurposing or just plain garbage problem (since not all garbage as yet can be repurposed), putting aside for a moment the related greenhouse problem. Buddhism or rather lower-case buddhism, shares together with Shinto on one hand (Japan) or Dao on the other (China) very non-western nature attitudes that should be spelled out here. There is that idea left over from a more active period of buddhism in East-Asia of a mind that is co-extensive with everything—is the universe. A unity however that must remain non-dualistic if we are to take seriously an individuality as anything other than an illusion (The founder of West Coast Zen, Suzuki-roshi, used to use a very effective phrase in this regard: he'd refer to “things as they is” thus encompassing the omnipresence of mind without neglecting the very real separation as well, of one thing from another; that attitude is also referred to in the popular small-b buddhist hymn, “the merging of unity and difference” which means what it says and is worth thinking of as a concept.) So then: keeping in mind the reality of all nature as being as well all mind, we can say: of course all humans are mind but what else. A jaguar? Yes. A rock. Yes? What then about steel and glass high-rises? Inclusiveness can never be an anything but a necessity—but what about when this necessity gives rise to a thought that I'd merely sketch by expressing an explosive “Ugh” out of my mouth—to indicate my sentiments. Against these so-called individualities we propound the absolute and growingly more urgent need for such opposite qualities as: emptiness, silence, peace, non-discrimination. On a human level can I say this is what is meant by “serenity”?

Now of all buddhist countries I think Japan must stand out, for it's had to maximize certain mainly (but not exclusively—and here we're back to the Dao and Shinto) buddhist attitudes. For instance you're very wary about

going beneath the ground to get stuff to build with, or make practical instruments with. That's a determined intention to break with metal whenever possible (there are always exceptions: there are wonderful Buddha bronzes). What if in fact, instead of steel and concrete, bamboo can serve just as well for just about anything? To get metal you need to rupture the earth—cut into it, wound it. If that's a poetic sentiment, so be it, but what if it's also and as well more than that? This is where Wagner came in prophetically both in his Ring Cycle and in related writings. Break up the earth in the Amazon for instance and it'll never recover; you'll never ever for millennia be able to see enough recovery to get rainforest/jungle there again. You'll have a scar, junk, wasted land, a spirit of desolation that infects both people and things abutting it with deleterious consequences to any global economy able to be envisaged at this point. Scarification. It starts way early in the history of our cultures. You think way back in Greco-Roman antiquity, and were they free from this? They had gold, silver, copper and lead—and mainly it took instituting purposeful mining, rupturings of the earth that still exist in situ and have not gone away! These reductions of any viable use for spots of land for more than two millennia. Think about it. You can go to Carrara in Italy today, in antiquity named Luna, to see the still-extant scarification caused by Roman rapacity for marble. It is still a wasteland. And ugly to boot. What is the cost then of metal extraction as we push into the third millennium, and what does it bode for the earth's future?

If you excise Wagner's notorious anti-semitism (the metal-workers in the Ring Cycle as stand-in Jews, as everyone I think realizes at this point) you can find food for thought in Wagner's pressing concern for the destruction that (the Rhine-gold that had to be extracted unnaturally from the earth) will ensue. Gold stands for metals as Wagner's theory-writings make clear, and rupture of the earth: need we throw out this Wagner insight after once recognizing the anti-semitism that really is immaterial to it? In other words, why throw out the baby with the bathwater. I think of those absolutely huge natural—and hundred-miles wide—plastic materials all swirling in mid-Pacific vortices whose clean-up is not yet in sight.

In classical Japan solutions to the problem of making functional, as well as wondrously fascinating and beautiful, buildings of architectural note, in the forms of villas, palaces, temples, monasteries, etc.—was absolutely a

simple one—one in which the need to remain in alignment with nature was recognized. Though not necessarily OUR solution, Japan's example offers provocations for our fabrication of dwellings and important architectural sites. The Japanese made very detailed blueprints along with sketches and outlines of, say, temple or palace treasuries and made everything (with the exception of a few bronzes and the like for divine personae as well as some lead for the drainpipes) out of vegetative materials, mainly wood and bamboo. This of course decayed sooner than our cement and steel. That problem was dealt with—the Japanese, following their blueprints, simply rebuilt—exactly, with every detail replicated—famous temples, palaces and the like—every few decades or generations as was needed—thereby keeping exactly the temple in say 1800 that had initially been constructed at the time of China's Great Tang—a millennium earlier in other words. Can we learn from this—or at least the spirit of this?

The truth is we are saving no money at all in choosing metallic over vegetable since the American infrastructures as they are, with metal and high-tech, are literally unsustainable. With diminishing metal resources, the rarity of rare earths, the garbage problem and so on, the solution to the infrastructures problem (ports, railway systems, airports, highways, train systems and so on) practically speaking, if in fact they can be renewed with the same materials, will only in that case become a still bigger problem. The future will look like *Blade Runner*. Do we want this?

Perhaps bamboo might not be our thing. Perhaps the indigenously contributed adobe constructions might. Time will tell. But best get going. And taking nature seriously will also entail a revision of our current love of the inhumanly vertical—the high-rises. They will have to go too.

Don't dig up the earth. Get rid of social media, tablets, iPhones, tweeting which after all not only create vastly more of a precious-metal disposal problem but act as they admittedly do to help minimize person-to-person and real social skills leaving users unable to fix their mind, amid multi-tasking, on any single thing for a much shorter time than was the case in the past. Humans with much technology tend to become blind to real basics in human intercommunication. Stop digging up the earth for metals, and especially precious ones. Let them alone. Choose vegetation as your means of fabrication of whatever is needed.

**JS:** Talk about online dating and being lonely. You say that recently Bob says you need to put your shoulder to it, but in reply to your thoughtful letters you get images of genitals, you say, the ugliest part of the body, at least, in isolation.

**BB:** Yes. I would have preferred finding someone in my Zen sangha for instance. But that didn't happen. Or in the literary community, but that didn't either. And so on. And here real community, just referred to in the previous question, comes in again. As opposed to virtual communities, so-called. I mean, isn't it far more likely that people encountering each other in community of some kind will be more likely to find more compatible partners, as a rule? I think so at any rate.

I know that high-tech represents some advances for humankind but the opposition to the substitution of mechanical/digital communications for person-to-person ones has a downside often considered to be a growing dark-side of the thing. When you think of what's left out in digital communication of any kind there's a loss that has to be recognized. And yet, for lack of something better, for lack of a communal backing for the more personal exchanges of the past, it has become pretty hard to go it alone.

Hence after four years of no romance following Jamie's death I decided to try once more for a partner, and what happened? To meet even the person I'm now dating meant a good month of spending the better part of the day at the computer or on the phone, with the dating services. As most people recognize, there are a lot of jerks out there who use these services, befuddled drug users, incompetent or uninteresting people, or people at the end of their ropes—I've talked to or typed messages with lots of people who actually turned out to be bed-ridden and approaching death and were just lonely. Better they should get help from some organization offering spiritual help at that point, perhaps. Hence the degradation involved in seeking romantic companionship online, or thru phone services. Ugh! Does this contribute to the mounting sectors of society that by digitalizing themselves have maybe made themselves more efficient but in the process also have de-humanized themselves?

Makes me feel like, well, why not keep ranting against the increasing mechanizations of our lives? I got so tripped up, got so much mud on my

hands having to resort to this, even if in the end, yes, I've found a person with whom there's a romantic possibility, a person I really like. But wouldn't it have been a lot more human and a lot nicer to go thru possible dates without having to deal with a lot of mud on one's hands? Which is how it goes—you do get mud on your hands. Ikk! And a philosophical question—once your hands are dirty can you just wash your hands and be like you were beforehand? Double ikk! Sorry, don't think so!

But I will try to cleanse my mind of hatreds, hoping to substitute calm at least for a while. Can social justice be promoted with a mind of serenity? I think so. Maybe.

xoxo Jocelyn,  
B.