Several years ago, after fishing an evening mayfly hatch for wild brook and brown trout, I sat by a northern Wisconsin pond, Brock Pond, sipping Old Grand-Dad whiskey, smoking a cigarette, croaking along with the frogs—all good subversive behavior according to civilized, urban standards. Suddenly a philosophic lightning bolt shuddered through my body. The universe burst forth into sound with the croak of a frog. Before, there had been a vast, meaningless silence of whirling forces. Now there was sound, a sounder, and an audience appreciative of the character and quality of the sound, which was laced with subtle meanings and significance. Before a soundless universe; now a soundful universe, a cosmological frog leap forward.

No doubt my memory of the details is selective. Probably there were pre-frog murmurings to be overheard. But the basic philosophic insight of the cosmological emergence of sound (as well as life) seems right, and Brock Pond ever since has been for me a sacred time and place for philosophic reflection.

Actually, I have lately been thinking about our world and its evolutionary life as one vast, temporally deep frog pond, serving as the wider natural context of our humanly cultural adventures. I think back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the modern ontological and scientific revolution—a job left only half finished. Perhaps the New Science of the sixteenth century moved the sun and earth away from the center of the universe, but thanks to personal gods, universal reason, language, and other cultural talents, we humans still consider ourselves at the center of all things significant and meaningful, right in the middle of the frog pond. Despite Darwin, little has changed. We “central ones” take all the natural resources that we need for ourselves (billions of us), leaving what is left over for the rest of the pond’s creatures, present and future. We industriously pursue our economies and technologies, spewing our wastes into the pond, recycling some of these wastes, but not enough. Few seem to care or even to know what we are doing, and all of us, like it or not, live more or less in the middle of the pond.

A few individuals, Aldo Leopold among others, have digested the Darwinian message and are morally and practically anxious to move us humans off-center, to find a seemly and right lily pad upon which to live and croak, morally moved.
by a central concern for the overall and indefinite well-being of the frog pond as a whole. This is only a frog pond version of Leopold’s land ethic, but neither has penetrated our urban centers and minds, where so much fateful human action and decision making take place.

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Let me take one more philosophic turn around the pond in hope that it might somehow help. Prompted by the notions of orchestral causation and emergent individuals, I have begun to think of genomes, human or other, as scores of music, say a symphonic poem or Mozart’s Requiem. Imagine the score in the hands respectively of elementary school, high school, college, and professional orchestras, soloists, and choruses. Given the differing contexts, we would expect to emerge different phenotypical results, more or less artfully expressed. So it is with uniquely diverse genomes in their uniquely different contexts.

But is not this the realm of life, the frog pond, itself? There are billions upon billions of organisms with their innumerable genomes, a vast realm of historical interaction provoking the expressions of scores of natural music, some bursting into sound, some taking other naturally artful forms. What an incredible realm of historically engendered existence! So much value ongoingly bursting forth into being.

But then there is this problem at the center of the frog pond, that small section of the natural orchestra that refuses artfully and harmoniously to blend in with the others, risking discordant cacophony in following its own tune. In fact, by its misadventures, it is destroying or degrading the genomic scores of other individuals and species of life. (We are told we are amidst a “human extinction” event.) The grand symphony of life and its future is being seriously marred and degraded. If we humans do not tune in, the pond literally might become frogless, humanless, and soundless. Such a lapse into disvalue and lifelessness is a potential ontological and cosmological evil that vastly overshadows the pleasures, pains, life plans, and deaths of individual organisms, human or other. The wonderful and complex interplay of the bounded, boundaries, and the boundless threatens to become unraveled, leaving insignificant life or animate being, if any at all. Relatively or absolutely, there might be only the soundless, the valueless, the boundless. We would then need to replace the Benedictus of Mozart’s Requiem with a contrite Ignoramus.

Urban philosophers and ethicists of mainstream utilitarian or deontological persuasions will be of little help here. They remain at the center of the pond, all too humanly bound and concerned. We need more measured reflections. We will need bullfrog philosophers who somehow can forcibly express the pond’s natural music and the complexly intertwined and interactive symphonies that need to be protected and reinforced. Perhaps it will only be by such philosophic and moral music, or other value expression, that we will be able to penetrate and awaken urban ears, including our own. How else are we going to save nature’s protean but vulnerable sacred time and space, our earthly frog pond? This is urgent business that knows no bounds.

Strachan Donnelley (1942-2008) was founder and president of the Center for Humans and Nature. His book Frog Pond Philosophy: Essays on the Relationship between Humans and Nature, from which this essay is drawn, was published by the University Press of Kentucky in 2018.

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