

## In Our Element – with Linda France

### Episode 8: Space

#### TRANSCRIPT

Linda France:

In Our Element, a poet's inquiry into climate change. [Music swells]

Linda France:

Episode eight. Space.

Linda France:

Space is what holds all the other elements together. What they move around in. As we also occupy space, it is our field of operation. One extreme response to the climate crisis is to propose moving from our desecrated earth to begin the anthropocentric enterprise all over again, and colonizing another planet. A more sustainable and timely form of space exploration is considering how we might choose to make space for solitude and reflection, to broaden and deepen our perspective on time and the cycles of nature. Nonlinear, they don't follow clock time or manmade schedules. Connecting with that deeper awareness, we might wake up to the fact of impermanence, and with kindness and compassion recognize the inevitability of death.

Larry Butler:

We've taken death out of our living lives.

Linda France:

Poet, Larry Butler.

Larry Butler:

We need to live with the dying and the dying is happening all the time. It's happening right now, as we're speaking. There are people dying, there are leaves dying, there are flowers dying. That space to really appreciate not only the grief around death, but also the beauty of it. Because there is beauty in dying, I think. There's some talk about the good death, but what about the beautiful death? And we think of the beautiful death of autumn. When we see the beauty of the trees that are singing their silent song before they fall.

Linda France:

Death connects us all. On an individual, relative level, everybody and everything dies and comes to an end. On the level of quantum physics, a continuum may be possible, with matter or energy vibrating through space-time forever. Borges caught a sense of that when he wrote "Death is just infinity closing in."

Sheila Templeton:

My little great niece, Heidi. She had leukemia and she died just a few weeks before her first birthday.

Linda France:

Poet, Sheila Templeton.

Sheila Templeton:

A huge trauma in her family. She was actually in bed with a parent on either side, and she just slipped away quietly. And her dad said to me, when he was talking about it, he said, 'and together we washed her.' And I just, I thought, oh, that is so beautiful. And it just seemed to be that engagement with death as well as life is something that we need.

Linda France:

As we face a world that is changing before our eyes, glaciers melting, forests burning, insects dying in enormous numbers. Creatures going extinct and human beings dying or displaced because of floods, drought, famine, and wars all caused by climate change. Many people are experiencing feelings of grief, sadness, despair, and disorientation. How do we meet that space of loss and absence? How do we live our lives to the full in the short span that we have? How do we live our dying? Larry Butler and Sheila Templeton in Glasgow have just co-edited an anthology of poetry and prose called *Living Our Dying*.

Larry Butler:

Now I've been working with Sheila for probably three years on this book. We've been in a group together for a number of years called diealog, D-I-E-A-L-O-G, where we talk about death and dying. And it is creating a space where we can talk. Where you can really open up to what you are feeling and thinking about death, your own death, your family's death, friends. The death of the world, the death of our planet.

Sheila Templeton:

I don't think I ever thought that I needed such a space. It was really bumping into Larry at the wake of our dear friend who had just died, and I had just had so much bereavement in my life at that point, and I turned to Larry and said something about how facing my own mortality was suddenly something I couldn't avoid anymore. I think I'd managed to avoid it nicely for 70 odd years. We divorce ourselves from the process of death and dying nowadays. And you know, dying is taken care of by often doctors and medics and hospitals and undertakers. People are really quite happy, I think, they think they're happy, to have this separation between life and death and keep death in a nice hygienic little place. And I don't think it's good for our souls or our emotions to do that.

Linda France:

I asked Sheila to read her poem from the anthology, which is in Doric or Aberdonian Scotts. It has a beautiful music. And though you may not understand every word, I think you'll catch her drift.

Sheila Templeton:

Grief is the price for love. This poem came because I had just lost our dearly beloved cat. And so I wanted to write about this experience and I tried and tried and everything. It was not working. And what came up for me was this memory, maybe 50 odd years ago of my grandfather deciding that his dog, he was very, very old and suffering. And my grandfather had made this decision to, well, to have him put down, but he did it himself. But this memory just came up as poems often do. And so this was the poem that got written for me to express that grief.

Sheila Templeton:  
'Lairnin about Luve'

He cairriet Paddy tae the car,  
the auld blue-bottle Morris.

They didnae cam hame til aifterneen,  
the usual time for thir entry, garten  
wi danglin leggy hare or rubbit.

It wis still winter-time, but a saft day.  
So a grave cud be dug as easy as that  
can iver be, fan the tall chiel, my granda  
cam roun the side of the hoose, cradling  
a sma black tyke, swaddled in a saick.

Naebody helped. An naebody hinnered.  
Even we bairnies didnae ask.

Grunnie wis baking, fillin the kitchen  
wi a mound of gowden bannocks.

He sat outside tae clean his gun;  
then washed himself at the kitchen sink,  
forsakin oor new bathroom upstairs.

I lairnit about luve that day.  
He wid niver have used sic a word.

Larry Butler:

Personal grief. When we start talking about our griefs around deaths or loss of any kind, sometimes it triggers a response that is much bigger. I went to bed thinking about my son and what had happened to him yesterday or something like that. I wake up in the morning and suddenly I'm thinking about the fires in Australia. Why am I doing that? It's some personal grief opens out into a greater grief, a grief for the world, a grief from what's happening. And that could be different situations that are going on in the world. A lot of it probably related to climate change, but not exclusively. Could relate to war, could relate to famine in places, but these things are all interconnected. And I think climate change, certainly one of the roots into what's happening in the world and why we have a great grief about it.

Larry Butler:

I can go back, probably 65 years back to when I was a boy in California growing up in probably the most fertile valley of California. Santa Clara valley, where it was the prune capital of the world. We had cherry orchards, vineyards. It was a beautiful valley. And by the time I left there, all the orchards were dug up. All the vineyards were dug up. Asphalted over. Shopping malls made. It's now no longer known as Santa Clara valley. Locally it's known as Silicon valley. I can't even recognize my childhood when I go, when I visited there. And I have a lot of grief about that, and I didn't realize how much grief I had until I came away from there.

Linda France:

I'm interested in the way that in telling the truth about it, facing it directly, actually helps us make more of the lives that we have. Once you've faced your demons, and once you've expressed your grief and integrated that into your being, there's more of you can connect with life itself. You live a better life.

Sheila Templeton:

I've often thought that when I look back in periods of my life, that I'm almost asleep until I dare to unpack a lot of... Unpack the grief, unpack the sadness, and then it energizes me enormously. It's really impossible to... I think to be truthfully creative, unless I do that.

Larry Butler:

Like laughter, like yawning, tears are contagious. And if you are listening to somebody speaking about something that they are really touched by and their tears are rolling down their cheeks, you cannot help but feel a sense of empathy and connection with them. And tears will start filling your own eyes. And I think that sense of, the eyes wash out the pain. And when you finish your crying, which may take some time, then you do see with new eyes. It clears you, you could get a sense of clarity coming up and you start to see things differently and you see your own life differently.

Linda France:

The other thing that I think about it about really, really acknowledging the fact of our own mortality, and mourning deeply for ourselves and the planet is that, as you say, Larry, it triggers empathy. And it helps us to be kinder to ourselves and each other, because we see that this is the state we're in. This is what it's like. This is our story. And the only response to that is, as you say, great heart, great courage, great kindness. Sometimes we think of this thing being a blank space, a void, an emptiness, but actually it's what the Tibetan teacher Tsultrim Allione calls 'The Pregnant Zero'. It's full of all the seeds of new life. And that's what happens in terms of the cycle as well, isn't it? That we recognize that maybe it's our time to leave and for new life to take over. It goes on like that, every day. People are dying, but every day new babies are being born and that's just going on endlessly every single day. There's a spiral formation so that it's not just going round and round. There's a spiral. And it also, you know, that replicates the image that we use for the DNA, as well. So, it's got something, a very potent image, a symbol for life itself.

Larry Butler:

I go to my allotment most mornings when it's not pouring with rain. And I go there to potter, at this time of year pick raspberries and, and blackcurrants and things. And I also sit by a little

pond that I made with my partner and the little pond has a sculpture in it. It was comes from Assynt, up in the Northwest Scotland, a beautiful stone. It's not really a sculpture. It's a found piece. And on it is carved four words spiraling up the way. So, you can't read it unless you walk all the way around it. And in the summer you can't read it at all because there's too many leaves. You can only read bits of the letters. And they're very simple four words. And for me, they're about living well, and they're in a spiral going up the way. And it's simply the four words are, 'be-more-self-less,' be more selfless. And when I can achieve that, I live well.

Linda France:

I think that you are both grandparents. And I wondered how that affected the way that you thought about the climate emergency.

Larry Butler:

I think what it does for me is it increases my commitment to engage with what's happening in the world. In whatever way I can. Whether that's editing a book called Living Our Dying or singing with my choir, protest in harmony, writing poems about my sons and my grandson. Whatever it is, it makes me, in a way more alive, more wanting to make a difference, make a contribution. That sense of wanting to really connect with them now, knowing that I'm going to be dead when they're adults. And that sense of just, what can I do to make a difference now to their life in the future.

Sheila Templeton:

And I keep trying to speculate about what the world will be like for him, my grandson. And in many ways, I just, I can't imagine, but I obviously long for the world still to be, that sounds a bit dramatic, but for it to be a world that he can live in without so many of the compromises that we're seeing just now. I have to say, I alternate between despair on this one, but that doesn't win. What's much stronger is the optimism of new life.

Linda France:

Unlike the physics of carbon emissions, life and death are immeasurable. All three depend on each other to stay in balance and require careful attention. Learning to do things differently and keeping faith with the future. Not leaving space for regret.

Linda France:

Immeasurable. One.

Linda France:

'Immeasurable'

I

For the duration of this poem, imagine  
behind your belly-button, coiled, retractable,  
you carry a tape measure, passed down from your mother.  
Inside its ergonomic circular case  
(a little snailshell world), the tape lies sleeping.  
If you tug its silver horn to draw it out,  
You'll see the ladder markings of inches inching

and their fractions fractioning along its quivering  
length, metric and imperial. For the duration  
of this poem, all mass, all amplitude, let's  
call them years or months, days, or those ever-shrinking  
minutes you spool out so recklessly, as if your tape  
(like nothing else on earth) had no end to its tail.  
On the contrary, one day the mechanism  
will fail, give up, its measuring days over.  
And, snapped back, that's the full extent of your imagining.

II

In a world of second chances, what if  
those dark spaces behind your navel, in your gut  
were your own brain's hollows, the only centre  
you knew (as eastern medicine's always maintained);  
and with your mother's milk, you learned it held  
the whole world too. Wouldn't you sense more deeply  
what time is made of? Beneath your skin, within your breath.  
Might you measure it better – all the time  
and all the world that was given you, trusting  
each thing's connected, like in this poem, a set  
of, let's call them, interlocking boxes  
for keeping things in, and giving them away?  
What if, in this world of second chances  
(which is, let's be honest, in fact our last  
chance) you chose to act as if it were true?  
(Which it might be.) Imagine, what then?

Linda France:

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