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Keywords: Kierkegaard; Glück; existentialism; solace; acceptance

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Feel the fear and do it anyway: drawing strength from Søren Kierkegaard and Louise Glück in existentialist pandemic times

Jytte Holmqvist[1]

Abstract

This poetic analysis queries what it means to be human and alive at a time of interrupted pandemic realities. We draw a link between Søren Kierkegaard and our contemporary Louise Glück in their focus on an individual battling with fears, who goes their own way defying norms and conventions. How does Kierkegaard in *The lily of the field and the bird of the air* (1849) metaphorically show us the way to finding inner peace and a sense of solace in that which is supposedly less, and teach us to appreciate the divinity found in nature? What does Glück teach us about resilience in collections of poetry *The wild iris* (1992) and *Averno* (2006)? How do the two thematically converge and indirectly advocate for a life of stoic resilience where, with individual freedom as our end goal, we learn to endure anguish and pain – embracing suffering as a way forward?

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Preliminary thoughts in light of the Covid-19 pandemic

In a shaky 2022, where we linger in the trembling pandemic aftermath, people across the globe have lost their footing and nothing is quite what appeared to be the case only recently. As we struggle to find our way in a world turned upside down, we are reminded of our own vulnerability, and we realise we are no longer in control – if we ever were. Rather, we are at the mercy of a fate that seems to have its own uncanny agenda, the natural elements, and the universe at large – but perhaps it is ultimately for better rather than worse? Naked and unequipped for what was to come and uncertain of the status of the world and where we are headed from here, we find refuge in poetry and consolation in words and phrases that we ourselves may be unable to express. In the in-between literary world of abstract words and abstract thinking, existentialist thoughts offer a sense of relief at a time when queries as to who we are, what role we ought to play, and what is the best way forward plague the ruminating human mind. Existentialism and its main tenets, particularly as expressed by Søren Kierkegaard; a polarizing literary and critical force in 19th century Copenhagen[2], concern all of us. It becomes a movement or philosophy that guides us and helps us break away from

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[2] Catholic to the core, Kierkegaard's Copenhagen was one of contrasts: "Populated with the finest objects of study of virtually every kind – crazy and genius, plebian and aristocratic, impoverished and wealthy – Copenhagen was a pulsating psychological laboratory for Kierkegaard. He returned home to

the collective and choose a more individualistic path forward. We may, as a result, end up stronger than those of us more outwardly conventional and who cautiously choose the more well-trodden path of normality – and, inevitably, of predictability. If we draw from the Kierkegaardian metaphor of the "enten-eller" ("either/or") we learn that we have a choice, driven by free will – should we feel inclined to explore other options. There are alternatives if we look for them, but in our responsibility to find our own way, at our own risk, we must prepare to embrace a life of anxiety, of ambivalence and unpredictability. If we embark on the road less travelled, we may gain all the more from doing so. We begin to really exist or, as Peter Thielst reflects in his straightforward and personalised account about his controversial fellow Dane,

> What does it mean to *exist*? In purely linguistic terms, it means *coming forward*, stepping out, coming into view – becoming visible, to oneself and others. You *become real* when you begin to relate to yourself, i.e., when you see and acknowledge yourself for who you are.[3]

Blindfolded at first, some of us leap into the great unknown and an engulfing darkness that may ultimately be our salvation. Kierkegaard, it has been argued and the observation is applicable to his existentialist oeuvre in general, uses his idea of alternative options or outcomes "to drive out mediocrity and 'spiritlessness', along with the pagan optimism which made Christianity just one more item on the agenda of finitude."[4] The philosopher, short-lived, fervent, and ever prolific, was steeped in a strictly Lutheran tradition. And yet, he points to a way forward that can open up for new beginnings – uncomfortable as it may be at times – and life can finally begin; right at the end of our comfort zone.

Introduction: interconnecting themes – philosophy and poetry find common ground

This article reads our bewildering new normal in an existentialist light and draws a link between philosophy and poetry by seeking 'uncommon commonalities' between Søren Kierkegaard and Louise Glück – awarded the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature "for her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal"[5], and likewise the recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for *The wild iris* (1992). Several of her poems will be briefly analysed in the discourse to follow. Active in different eras and operating within vastly different societal and cultural contexts, Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Glück (b. New York City, 1943) nevertheless meet at a thematic juncture with subject matters that concern all of us across the board – perhaps especially in the Western world. They dwell on aspects of the human condition, exploring issues that plague all of us and that relate to our bewildering worldly existence. Kierkegaard's

his writing desk enriched with situation and mood, which he retained in his notebooks." The Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre at the University of Copenhagen, "Kierkegaard's Copenhagen: private eye and street preacher," https://teol.ku.dk/skc/english/about-soeren-kierkegaard/the-global-dane-soeren-kierkegaard-teologian-philosopher-author/kierkegaards-copenhagen.

[3] Allra först: vad menas egentligen med att *existera*? Rent språkligt betyder det *att träda fram*, stiga ut, komma till synes – bli synlig, både för sig själv och andra. Det handlar om *att bli verklig* i och med att man förhåller sig till sig själv, det vill säga ser och uppmärksammar sig själv som den man är." Peter Thielst, *Man förstår livet baklänges – men måste leva det framlänges. Historien om Søren Kierkegaard*, 133 (Swedish book edition with the quote translated freely into English).

[4] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: a fragment of life*, 20.

[5] Poetry Foundation, "Louise Glück," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/louise-gluck.

notion of human suffering seems to point to the idea of death being ever present throughout our lives. From today's perspective this, in a way, provides us with a sense of relief during a lingering Covid-19 pandemic where fearlessness is called for as we realise life is finite and the end may come when we least expect it. As, in rocky virus-ridden times, we strive to make sense of our worldly existence and seek a way to navigate ups and downs, we must stoically accept the solitude that comes from making life choices that distance us from the crowd. We would do well in turning to the power of the written word; poetic and philosophical escapism offering ways for us to momentarily step away from life as we (did not) know it. And yet, it is in the very escape that we may find ourselves anew. *Nature*, *stillness*, and *reflection*, particularly as concepts advocated by Glück and Kierkegaard, elevate our existence to a whole different level. As we begin to distinguish what lies beneath, we surrender, slow down, and feel the silence in nature and the silence within, and we approach a level of spirituality that may, or not, be connected to a godly presence. That is to say that in Kierkegaard, nature and God are not inherent opposites. The sacred is not confined to the strict parameters of religious institutions but it is likewise, or perhaps first and foremost, found in nature and in the non-artificial external space. Indeed, there are otherworldly dimensions to be discovered in becoming one with nature and also acknowledging the passing of the seasons. As Kierkegaard reflects in one of his many notebooks: "Why I so much prefer autumn to spring is that in the autumn one looks at heaven – in the spring at the earth."[6] If we disregard the philosopher's undeniable references to God and divinity, Kierkegaard's quote can be interpreted from a humanistic and existentialist perspective. Called "philosopher of the heart[7], an "indefatigable" walker, a careful observer of the natural world and a naturalist[8], and a philosophical "outsider"[9], Kierkegaard rose above and went beyond the dogmatic beliefs of Christianity. His religious faith was linked to free will – a faith that promotes the individual stepping away from the norm and seeking alternatives, exploring an existence found beyond normalcy and conventionality. That is where life can truly begin, even if we are often still plagued by uncertainty and doubt. Existentialism begins to seep into our own lives; a worldview to embrace in times of trouble. Austin Cline explains, in line with Kierkegaardian theories, that:

> Existentialism puts the emphasis on moral individualism [...] There is no basis and given human nature that is common to all people and so each person must define what humanity means to them and what values or purpose will dominate in their lives ... Rather than seeking the highest good that would be universal, existentialists have sought means for each individual to find the highest good *for them*, regardless of whether it might ever apply to anyone else at any other time.[10]

The existentialist focus on the individual becomes evident. We are, to quote Sartre, also "condemned to be free" [11] and with that rele-

[6] Søren Kierkegaard, *The lily of the field and the bird of the air*, xix.

[7] Clare Carlisle, *Philosopher of the heart: the restless life of Søren Kierkegaard*.

[8] Kierkegaard, op. cit., xvi, xviii, and xx, respectively.

[9] Utforska sinnet, "Historien om den existentialistiska filosofen Søren Kierkegaard," https://utforskasinnet.se/historien-bakom-den-existentialistiska-filosofen-soren-kierkegaard/.

[10] Austin Cline, "Ethical Individualism," *Learn Religions,* 25 January, 2019, https://www.learnreligions.com/ethical-individualism-249957.

[11] "Man is condemned to be free" by Jean-Paul Sartre, from the lecture, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) translated by Philip Mairet (1948).

gated to a life of ambivalence and unpredictability. In an ideal world we should, as words promoted by Kierkegaard, be "happily enamoured"[12] with ourselves and give ourselves the chance to venture further – and we begin to take flight.

Søren Kierkegaard: *The lily of the field and the bird of the air* (1849)

The lily of the field and the bird of the air comes across as brief and unassuming at first sight. It "wishes to remain in concealment, just as it came into existence clandestinely – a little flower in the great forest."[13] And yet, this little book is all the deeper also when read in light of the current pandemic. It provides profound insights into what really matters at a time of external trouble and turmoil, of a seemingly unstoppable virus, of rising death tolls across the world in the midst of the catastrophe, of death constituting an ominous presence – with no one left untouched no matter social rank or status – of continuous lockdowns and solitary confinement. Kierkegaard himself might, if he had been aware of what was to come 17 decades later, have called the impact of this global malaise "stille fortvivelse" ("silent despair")[14]. Kierkegaard's metaphoric reflections in *The lily of the field and the bird of the air,* written in parallel with partly interlinked book *The Sickness unto Death* (published 2.5 months later) is an elegant account of what it means to invite God and the divine into our lives, with the writer declaring, in the reflective lead-up to the productive process, that:

> The degree to which it is God who directs the whole thing is clearest to me from the fact that the discourses on the lily and the bird were produced at that time [the year prior to publication] – and that was just what I needed. God be praised! Without fighting with anybody and without speaking about myself, I said much of what needs to be said, but movingly, mildly, upliftingly.[15]

The lily of the field and the bird of the air is, more than anything, a defence of nature, and of the spiritual dimensions of reality that are welcomed by Kierkegaard in an almost exuberant manner. God is externally omnipresent in nature and can thereby be internally embraced – but in order to do so we must first be willing and able to see the magnitude of the apparently small or little recognised. We must practise silence and non-suffocating obedience and we should likewise value simplicity and be like a bird "lighter than all earthly burdens" that "soars in the air, lighter than air."[16] By practising a healthy distance from ourselves and our own supposed grandiosity we discover the essence of life in the truest aspect of the word. When re-read in the societal context of 2022, at a time when we have – finally – been brought to our knees, Kierkegaard's book becomes a manual about how to live better, how to delve deeper and see the spiritual sophistication of simplicity. If we remain still, acknowledge the profoundness of silence, and likewise adopt *fear* and *trembling* as words to guide us, we can 'talk with God' – whomever God or the divine is. It is up to us to define this God according to when we live and our societal circumstances.

[12] Wesley Walker, "Learning from Kierkegaard's three Godly discourses in *The lily of the field and the bird of the air*," *Conciliar Post*, 6 July, 2018, https://conciliarpost.com/theology-spirituality/learning-from-kierkegaards-three-godly-discourses-on-the-lily-of-the-field-and-the-bird-of-the-air/.

[13] Kierkegaard, op. cit, 3.

[14] "A phrase that makes at least half a dozen appearances, both in his journals and in his published work, between 1839 and 1852." Kierkegaard, *The lily of the field and the bird of the air*, xv.

[15] Bruce H. Kirmmse *et al.*, eds., *Kierkegaard's journals and notebooks, vol. 5*, 352.

[16] Kierkegaard, op. cit., 9.

Everything, as Kierkegaard points out, "takes place at its appointed time"[17] and "[o]nly in silence *is* the moment."[18] Importantly, both from the perspective of his own times and from our own perspective of today, Kierkegaard acknowledges that suffering is necessary and unavoidable: therein lies its emotive significance. He makes indirect reference to his contemporary society when he recommends – thereby seemingly advocating for independent action of the individual then and now – courage as we move forward to more meaningful new beginnings. And we can, without regret, step away from the Church as an institution:

> The bird is not free from suffering, but the silent bird frees itself from what makes the suffering more burdensome: from the misunderstood sympathy of others; frees itself from what makes the suffering lasts longer: from all the talk of suffering; frees itself from what makes the suffering into something worse than suffering: from the sin of impatience and sadness.[19]

It is in our very capacity to face and endure stoic suffering, or what we in paraphrased Kierkegaardian terms may call an "impassioned self-relation without any external constraint"[20], that we become masters of our own fate. That is to say that by focusing our attention on how to best explore and allow space for new ventures (and with that, possibly, misadventures) we can find a middle way between Christianity as an institution, faith as our personal guiding star, and individual attempts at finding happiness in stillness and solitude while we head in a less conventional direction. We must not shy away from suffering or adopt a fearful attitude. On the contrary, when we confront pain and accept it as an inevitable element of the human condition, we start to rise above. And we begin to discover our own innate capabilities and potential.

Louise Glück: *The wild iris* (1992) and *Averno* (2006)

In a 2020 interview with fellow writer and journalist Colm Tóibín and which takes Greek mythology as an entry point, a candid and astute Louise Glück reflects on her career and the words that, at one stage, came to her but that had, as yet, "nowhere to go".[21] She explains that after writing two books she entered a verbal hiatus. She was happily living in Vermont and loved the world in which she was living, but in dialogue with Tóibín she stresses that periods like these occur "with painful frequency"– "it is not a tunnel, it is a well and you are not getting out."[22] When we explore Kierkegaard and his body of work, he steps forth as a critic, scholar and philosopher who wrote fervently and proliferatively seemingly without restraint; all through personal setbacks, public scorn and scrutiny and, correspondingly, public successes. Glück who, as opposed to Kierkegaard, has truly experienced both the burden and many joys of serious family commitments, likewise draws on personal experiences and anecdotes as she crafts her many poems that take us to different realms and back. Her first collection

[17] *Ibid*., 23.
[18] *Ibid*., 24.
[19] *Ibid*., 26.
[20] Alastair Hannay and Gordon D. Marino, eds., *The Cambridge companion to Søren Kierkegaard*, 379.
[21] Louise Glück and Colm Tóibín, "Live from the NYPL: Colm Tóibín in conversation with Louise Glück," New York Public Library, 9 October, 2020, video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3kQGM_KhHQ; cf., Louise Glück and Colm Tóibín, "Live from the NYPL: Colm Tóibín with Louise Glück: Clytemnestra Revisited," New York Public Library, 15 May, 2017, video, https://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/live-nypl-colm-toibin-louise-gluck-clytemnestra-revisited.
[22] YouTube video interview with Glück, op. cit.

of poetry *Firstborn* came out in 1968 and features a "variety of first-person voices, all angry and alienated."[23] Over the years her poems have become more profoundly reflective and in simple, almost journalistic terms she dwells on aspects of human existence. Ever perceptive, she captures the bright moments, the resilience required of us to survive in the first place, and the inherent suffering it means to be human. Glück writes effectively and without excessive elaboration; her words chosen after careful deliberation. Her work skilfully balances contrasts and has been described as "thrilling and surprising, intimate and grand" and her poems "are anathema to easy comfort, and often seem to ban or forbid the going and conventional emotional logic. And yet people read them to know the contours of their own inner lives."[24] Glück's poetry is sparse and cuts to the core. She is known for her "technical precision, sensitivity, and insight into loneliness, family relationships, divorce, and death".[25] Reading between the lines, in her texts we discover sentiments that linger and unexpressed emotions that dwell beneath the surface. Realistic with dark undertones, Glück's poems speak of human relations and episodes in life that leave us hurt and yearning. Sombre in tone, her poetry is a reflection on life and death, longing and belonging, on what troubles us and what is yet to come ("death cannot harm me, more than you have harmed me, my beloved life").[26]

In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech for which she expressed gratitude, Glück explains her literary style as follows: "I believe that in awarding me this prize, the Swedish Academy is choosing to honor the intimate, private voice, which public utterance can sometimes augment or extend, but never replace."[27] It is in her emphasis on suffering and silence, in the quiet hope that can, at any time, be replaced by disillusionment – and that may be the result of our ambivalent approach to life and the many possibilities we have in a Western world where we are now slowly getting on top of the Coronavirus – where Glück finds common ground with Kierkegaard. Well aware that happiness may be ephemeral, Glück promotes resilience and us resigning to a fate that was not shaped in line with our own wishes but that, rather, was all the more unpredictable. Aforementioned volumes *The wild iris* (1992) and *Averno* (2006) – with a title inspired by a lake in southern Italy and "which the ancient Romans believed was the entrance to the underworld"[28] – were published 14 years apart. And yet, they have much in common. Within the same volume *The wild iris*, "Snowdrops", "End of winter" and "Silver lily" all present us with a contrast or turn of events that we could not always see coming. Glück paints a number of her poems in a sombre light. Thus, "Snowdrops" stresses that you "know what despair is" and talks of the "the raw wind of the new world". The second verse and the end of the poem reads:

> I did not expect to survive,
> earth suppressing me. I didn't expect
> to waken again, to feel
> in damp earth my body
> able to respond again, remembering
> after so long how to open again
> in the cold light
> of earliest spring–...[29]

[23] Academy of Achievement, "Louise Glück biography," 8 February, 2021, https://achievement.org/achiever/louise-gluck/.

[24] Dan Chiasson, "How Louise Glück, Nobel Laureate, became our poet," *The New Yorker*, 8 October, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-louise-gluck-nobel-laureate-became-our-poet.

[25] Poetry Foundation, "Louise Glück."

[26] Glück, "October"(from *Averno*), 10.

[27] Louise Glück, "The poet and the reader: Nobel lecture 2020. Louise Glück," *The New York Review*, 14 January, 2021, https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2021/01/14/louise-gluck-nobel-lecture-poet-and-reader/.

[28] Academy of Achievement, "Louise Glück biography."

[29] Glück, "Snowdrops", http://poetrytreeonthecharles.net/2020/10/snowdrops-by-louise-gluck/.

"End of winter" similarly elaborates on the coldness of the seasons and the corresponding metaphorical coldness within, and queries, rhetorically: "When has my grief ever gotten in the way of your pleasure?". The poem puts into sensory contrast "dark and light at the same time". "The silver lily", in turn, declares that "[t]he nights have grown cool again, like the nights of early spring, and quiet again. Will speech disturb you? We're alone now; we have no reason for silence."[30]And yet, there is a stoic fearlessness dwelling behind Glück's words of quiet despair and uncertainty. While she acknowledges the value of silence, she similarly recommends a stepping into speech, a meeting in the middle, and words as a tool by which to connect human to human. In "The silver lily", "[w]e have come too far together toward the end now to fear the end". And in "End of winter" a sad "good-bye" becomes "the one continuous line that binds us to each other." The goodbye is the end, yet is there a glimmer of hope in Glück's allusion to an interpersonal connection? Finally, are the final lines of "Snowdrops" there to bring us hope in the midst of despair? Should we be optimistic in spite of the melancholy that envelops us at the opening of the poem. "Snowdrops" offers grammatically disjointed yet telling words that suggest an altogether different outcome – and thereby a sense of hope:

> afraid, yes, but among you again
> crying yes risk joy. [31]

In the poet's "raw wind of the new world"[32], we face the cold. Perhaps we are alone with no apparent way to turn or path forward. And still, like Kierkegaard, also his American counterpart here shines a light in our existential darkness by ending her poem on a positive note: with "joy" a word that says it all. A raw and harsh wind blows through the new world we now dwell in. Could this metaphoric wind serve as a wakeup call to suggest that if we turn our current, both collective and individual hardships into lessons to learn from, we can reach further and become more complete as human beings than if we choose to remain within our comfort zone? Less is more, nature provides insights to draw from, and written words that seem to spell the end may, in fact, spell a new beginning. In Glück's third entry of long poem "October"(*Averno* 2006) where she describes nature in all its different guises during that month of the year, she highlights the pull of nature but also celebrates the very 'voicelessness' of that non-artificial environment. She seems to suggest that nature, when compared to human love and art, might reign superior: "[W]hat others found in art, I found in nature. What others found in human love, I found in nature. But there was no voice there." The poet returns to a similar thought in free-standing "Echoes" which holds that "[This] silence is my companion now" (*Averno*, 30). Glück: artist and poet whose words captivate with their careful precision and specificity. And yet, she occasionally moves away from language and recommends the lack of a voice and silence as ways to move forward into a new dimension – one where nature seduces us with its own silent language. Nature to Glück offers us the voice we lost in the midst of external noise and busyness, and while Kierkegaard senses the divine in nature, Glück's poetry recommends the approximation of the individual to a more organic state; one where we are in symbiosis with nature. She writes:

> The rest I have told you already. A few years of fluency, and then the long silence, like the silence in the valley before

[30] Louise Glück, "The silver lily," Poetry Foundation, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49760/the-silver-lily.
[31] "Snowdrops". Op cit.
[32] *Ibid*.

> the mountains send back your own voice changed to the voice of nature. (*Averno*, 30)

It has been held, with reference to Glück, that "[l]ife is a photosynthetic movement, where the soul and the body *respond* to light. This awareness itself makes us feel we have survived the darkness."[33] In her two last poems analysed in this paper: "Averno" and "The Evening Star", a quiet intergenerational protest, from old to younger ("Averno"), serves as a stark reminder that old age catches up on all of us and that it is time to "raise the veil", to see clearly and discover, with open eyes, that "*the mist has cleared.*"[34] In "Averno", within the old body and mind dwells the young; youth is trapped inside the body of the aged individual. If we dare to identify with the older version also of ourselves and allow the soul that wants to leave the physical confinement of the body a chance to break away, we learn the true meaning of respect and empathy human to human. Glück's second select poem from the *Averno* collection, "The Evening Star", is altogether more hopeful. It has a shimmer that sustains it as we move through it, verse by verse. Words and expressions like "vision", "splendour", brilliance," a light to "restore the earth" and a "power to console" become corner stones in a text that ends with a "thought" that becomes "visible again" (*Averno*, 39). If we concentrate on these poems, without venturing into an altogether darker one like "Persephone the Wanderer" and her "sojourn in hell"[35], we discover a poet who treads boldly into the dark and back again. Without being prescriptive, a remarkably humble, ever-discerning Louise Glück shines a light when we need it the most. Her poems illuminate and provide clarity. As we step further into our lingering pandemic existence, she responds our queries. It all suddenly feels lighter to bear, and we may begin to find the answer to our ongoing ruminations.

Final comparative comments by way of conclusion

Søren Kierkegaard and Louise Glück – far away yet so close. One a God-fearing individual who ended up going his own way and proposed that the individual steps away from societal conventionality. And the other, operating within an all-the-more secular context and thereby less guided but also less burdened by the doctrines of faith, is realistic in her head-on exploration of concerns that plague us now (and then). In response to our initial query, the two writers – active at a time haunted by existentialist queries that are not as contrasting as they may initially have come across – provide us with strength as we begin to include *ambivalence* and *unpredictability*, but also *individuality*, *independence,* and a rather shaky sense of *freedom* in our every day (post) pandemic vocabulary. *Silence*, *reflection*, and *aloneness* are concepts that stand out in the works of both Kierkegaard and Glück. But does that equate to us being lonely? There is true strength in solitude. We propose, in closing, that if we rely more on ourselves and our own not so hidden potential, and less on others, we may become more resilient, more courageous and – ultimately – more authentic as human beings. That way we can begin to tackle contemporary twists of fate, including pandemic complexities and viruses in different shapes and forms.

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[34] Glück, *Averno*, 61.

[35] Glück, *Averno*, 16.

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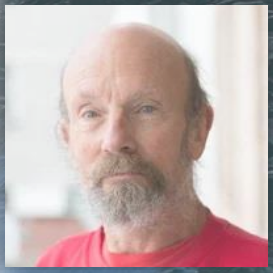

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