

A portrait of the artist as an old man: Wes Jackson in conversation with Robert Jensen

Wes Jackson and Robert Jensen

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Robert Jensen: Our subject today is creativity, and I'm calling this conversation "A portrait of the artist as an old man."¹ I hope you don't take offense at being called old, or at being called an artist. You aren't an artist in the traditional sense of having a career creating art, but we'll explore how everyday life is creative and how we may all be artists in some sense. The idea of creativity, like many concepts, can be hard to define. Most people think of creativity as involving imagination, the capacity to see something in a new way, to make connections in new ways. But rather than trying to define it, let's start with a different question. Where do you think creativity comes from?

Wes Jackson: My first, and easy, answer is simply – from *everywhere*. Something that didn't exist a moment ago is now here. There's a litter of kittens. There's an asteroid that hits the Earth, wipes out the dinosaurs and makes it possible for a few small mammals to take off in an evolutionary sense. There's the bonding of two gases, hydrogen and oxygen, to yield water, creating wetness from gases, which we call emergence. Creativity can't be stopped. The city of London burned in 1666 and came back as a different kind of city. And there's Michelangelo's *David*, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, what we would call professional art. But from my view, what one sees when looking out the window is artwork. Creativity is just everywhere.

RJ: When I asked you where you thought creativity came from, you immediately talked about the ecosphere, about the larger living world, what people sometimes call nature. Most people think of creativity as a human characteristic, but you went immediately to the ecosphere. Why does your thinking about creativity start with what is beyond the human?

WJ: Because I think that's the most obvious. You look out at the world and it is constantly unfolding, bringing forth novelty. Creativity on the part of the ecosphere seems unstoppable, and humans just picked up on that. We like to create, too, in our own way, and there's something deeply satisfying about that.

RJ: We've talked a lot about the importance of humility, about acknowledging our limits as human beings. Does your instinct to look first to the ecosphere have something to do with your concern about humans getting too uppity, too convinced of our own specialness? Am I reading too much into your answer?

WJ: No, that's not reading too much into it. Whether it's the tropical rainforest or a coral reef or a never-ploughed native prairie, we're looking at more than we can comprehend. And that generates an emotional jolt, as we ponder all that's out there in the world. When I look out at the world, the lesson I see is that we shouldn't take anything for granted. The only thing we can count on is change. Change is not necessarily surprising every time it comes, but there will always be a certain amount of amazement in watching it unfold.

RJ: Let's focus for a bit on human creativity. What are the most creative things that you've done in your own life? What work of yours required the most creativity?

WJ: I would say the most creative thing that I have come up with is the idea of building a grain agriculture based on the way that nature's never-ploughed prairie works. At the core of that is the ecosystem concept, the ecosystem as the primary unit of analysis. That came from a few particular experiences, pulling together a few ideas I had run into. In 1977 I was reading a General Accounting Office report on soil erosion, which was about as bad then as when the Soil Conservation Service was formed in the 1930s. I wondered how that could be. Around that same time, I took students here at The Land Institute on a field trip to the Konza Prairie, where we could see no soil erosion beyond replacement levels. When I got home, I was thinking about both those things. I grabbed a brown grocery sack and started thinking about what plants humans depend on for food. From some plants we eat the seeds, some we eat the fruit, some we eat the roots, and some we eat grass and broadleaf. I came up with a four-by-four matrix with the different combinations: polyculture versus monoculture, woody versus herbaceous, annual versus perennial and fruit-seed versus vegetative parts. That makes sixteen combinations in all, but four are irrational – for example, there are no woody annuals – and so that leaves

twelve possible combinations. It turned out that eleven of the twelve combinations were being used by humans in some useful manner, but there were no perennial grains for direct human use. As I was working on this, I kept thinking of something my major professor at North Carolina State University, Ben Smith, said to me. One night he wandered into my office and said, “We need wilderness as a standard against which to judge our agricultural practices.” Then he just turned around and walked out. That statement stayed with me. Out of all that thinking eventually came my book *New Roots for Agriculture* (1980), and now for several decades The Land Institute has been developing perennial grain crops that can be grown in mixtures, or polycultures.

RJ: People might hear that story and think, well, that’s science – ecology, agronomy, plant breeding. But you immediately put it in the realm of creativity. If you were to take away any one of those things – reading about soil erosion, going to the prairie, your professor’s comment – do you think you would have come up with the idea? Is it an idea you would have landed on eventually?

WJ: I’ve wondered and I don’t know. I just know that all those factors were there and the idea came to me. Why had that idea not emerged earlier from someone else? The Russians worked on perennial grains back in the late 1930s and ‘40s, but as far as I know they weren’t thinking about the ecosystem as fundamental. Why did humans not pursue this 10,000 years ago at the origins of agriculture? Annual grains have been the primary problem of agriculture, with erosion and soil degradation. Humans got dependent on those annual grains and we just kept on keeping on, and soil erosion continued, civilizations rose and fell. We really needed perennial grains right from the beginning.

RJ: Let’s talk more about science and creativity. People often make a sharp distinction between the arts and the sciences, with the assumption that the arts are where we see real creativity and science is a more rational, almost plodding enterprise. Is creativity essential to the sciences as much as to art?

WJ: I think so. There’s a lot of creativity in the sciences, and in engineering, too. But you don’t find it in galleries. Some of the products of that creativity would be too big to put in a gallery. Take the Brooklyn Bridge, for instance. That is a product of creativity, a work of art for its time. There are aesthetic considerations in building it that took a lot thought and creativity. I think a lot of engineers come up with ways of doing things that are quite creative. You also see it in smaller operations, such as on the farm, how people solve a particular kind of problem. A lot of human creativity comes out of problem-solving. Maybe I’m making the term too all-inclusive for some folk, but it suits me. Nature is producing a lot of creativity all the time. It can’t be stopped.

RJ: Some of the work on your own house might be unconventional, but it's still standing more than four decades later. When people think about creativity in something like architecture, they tend to think of some fabulous, famous house. Those kinds of projects usually have a lot of money behind them, with rich people paying architects to design creative houses. But you're talking about creativity that comes out of scarcity. Is there a relationship between scarcity and creativity?

WJ: There can be. I was in Oklahoma once, visiting a farm that had chickens and fish, and the farmer had come up with an elegant design in which the chicken manure dropped down into the water and the fish would eat it. I asked the man how he came up with that, and he said, "By being raised without having much money." He was a creative guy, and he got a certain satisfaction from doing without. It's like seeing the potential in a scrapyard. I have always liked going to the scrapyard, usually when I'm taking something to sell. I see pieces in the scrapyard and my mind begins to wonder about what I might do with that. If you're not careful, you end up buying more scrap than you brought in to sell. Scrapyards are one of the great places for increasing the imagination.

RJ: Saving materials is important to you, even if you aren't sure how you might use them. You told me you have been salvaging some lumber that had been left outside for too long, even though you don't have a use for that lumber in mind.

WJ: That's right. I don't have a specific use in mind. I don't know that it will ever get used. But I know that if I leave it out, eventually it will rot. I was talking to Wendell Berry about that the other day on the phone, about working to save lumber that I will never use. Very quickly he said something like, "It's the right thing to do. It is sane." I thought, well, that's an interesting word to use there. Some people might look at me and say, "Good grief, this guy is going to be 85 years old. He must be insane to do all that work for no reason." But Wendell already had the response, recognizing that it is sane to be saving things. It's like planting a tree knowing full well that you won't be around to harvest the fruit. Part of life's mystery, and one of the beautiful mysteries, I think.

RJ: You are saving lumber that has been outside and needs to come inside to be stored properly if it's going to be useful in the future. But you don't even know that your children or grandchildren will have a use for it.

WJ: Whatever the outcome, it's just the right thing to do. Someday there may be an auction, and someone may figure out a use for it. But it probably won't bring much money. It's certainly not worth my time in the way that money rewards our effort. But you just do it. I suppose you would say there's an existential reason. And now you're back into the realm of mystery.

RJ: I introduced this conversation by saying that you're not an artist in the conventional sense, but you recently had an art exhibition at the Birger

Sandzén Gallery in Lindsborg, Kansas, to display what you call your “art without ego” pieces. What is art without ego?

WJ: I have a sawmill, though I haven’t been using it much lately, and if you run off a slab of a tree trunk and turn it over, of course you have a flat side to examine. A lot of what’s available now are ash trees because the ash borer is killing a lot of trees. So, I had an ash tree that had gone down and I sawed it up. I had a piece about a foot wide and seven feet long. As you go down the board, you see where the borers have penetrated that tree and created a design. I took one piece, which I have hanging on the wall, and explained how in that design you could see the story of the universe. There’s a big hole where a branch had been, and I called that the big bang. And down the board are patterns that I call galaxies being formed, and planets, and stars. Your imagination can go to work and say, by golly, this is the universe in miniature. It helps if you have a sense of humour and don’t take yourself too seriously. But your imagination goes to work, and I find that satisfying. I put that piece in the exhibit. After the sawmill, the only thing I might do to a piece is apply some oil to sharpen up the design a bit. Then I hang them up. They show the workings of those creatures that are producing elegant designs in the course of just getting a meal. That’s why I call it art without ego. Those insects don’t know what they’re doing, but the beauty is there.

RJ: I just imagined someone saying, “Wes, that is really nice, but that’s not really art.” And then I immediately thought about Jackson Pollack and his abstract splatter and drip paintings, which sell for millions of dollars. Those look pretty random to most of us. If I gave you a choice between your ash borer art without ego and a Jackson Pollack, which one would you find more creative or more interesting?

WJ: More interesting to me would be the ash borer. Your question reminds me of a challenge that I like to run by my artist friends. Imagine one acre of never-ploughed native prairie, and think about the *Mona Lisa*. You’re given a choice: you either have to plough that prairie or you have to burn the *Mona Lisa*. Which do you do? I say you hang on to the one acre and don’t plough. This isn’t a real choice, of course, it’s just a thought experiment. People might say the *Mona Lisa* is irreplaceable, but it’s more replaceable than the ecosystem of that one acre, which you can never recreate once it’s disrupted with a plough. That landscape is somewhere between 1.8 million years and say 400,000 years old, as the ice pushed down a lot of that ground from Canada and parked it here in Kansas. How old is the *Mona Lisa*? Maybe 500 years. And we have a lot of photographs of it, and so why do we need the original *Mona Lisa*? What kind of species egocentrism is that? That material on that prairie was there before *Homo sapiens*. What’s all this fuss about the *Mona Lisa*? I like having that discussion, but people mostly want to move on. It’s an uncomfortable question.

RJ: So, who or what was more creative? Leonardo da Vinci or the glaciers that advanced and retreated, and in the process created that landscape?

WJ: Those glaciers also gave us the fertility of those soils, which make agriculture possible. This connects to question of how we see the concept of God. Gordon Kaufman, who was a professor in the Harvard Divinity School, thought it was most productive to think of God as creativity, rather than as a creator (Kaufman, 2000). That's the kind of thing that brings theology into alignment with the discoveries of the cosmologists, and maybe it is through creativity that we can connect religion and science in a new way. The universe seems to be all about process, and creativity as a result of process. There are novel, complex realities that arise from simpler realities through what scientists call emergence. A sperm and an egg unite, and a process gets underway that means those cells will never return to a former state. If we were to plough that prairie, it could never return to that former state, any more than a frog can become a tadpole. Kaufman wanted us to acknowledge that this unfolding universe is still unfolding around us all the time. We should appreciate the creation, wherever it presents itself, and have gratitude. There is so much for us to be celebrating all the time, including branches that have fallen down on our path in a walk in the woods that can bring us delight that is every bit as powerful as the best work in an art gallery.

RJ: I now live in the mountains of northern New Mexico, and that's pretty obvious to me every time I step outside. I'm seeing things that are more beautiful than anything that could ever be in an art gallery. You're saying that is everywhere, not just with a stunning mountain view.

WJ: And I want to be clear that I'm not objecting to art galleries. People like to create. I think people really can't stop creating, though everything humans create is not beautiful, of course. Atomic bombs are not beautiful. I have a hard time seeing the power lines going across the landscape as beautiful. But if one of those power poles came down in a storm, and I hooked it onto the back of my pickup with a chain and brought it home to run through the sawmill, I may find something absolutely beautiful in the same object that I considered to be ugly on the landscape. I'm just saying that the beauty is available, and it's our job to find it.

RJ: That sounds like the beginning of a kind of theology.

WJ: We appreciate the beauty of the landscape, but it does not appreciate us back. That's the way it is with this world. We may love this Earth, but this Earth does not care about us. We may want the Earth to care for us, to give us purpose. But instead of thinking that God or the universe gives us purpose, we can acknowledge that the universe gives us the opportunity to create purpose. I don't think you can ask for more than that.

RJ: Several times, usually when you are taking a walk and looking at the landscape, you've said, "Why is this not enough?" When you've been immersed in the beauty and the creativity of the world, that question seems to come to you. Why is this not enough for the modern world? Why do we need theme parks and casinos and cruise vacations? What's your answer to that question? Why is this not enough for many modern humans?

WJ: I think part of the answer is that we're too caught up in the daily activity of making a living, and so we don't see what's in front of us. This is an idea that has come to me during the past year, after I sold the few head of cattle that had been on our pasture. I can't count how many times in the past forty years I've been over that small acreage of pasture where the cattle were, sometimes on the way to the woods to take a walk. And now, all of sudden, with the cattle gone, I am seeing details in the landscape that seem to have become accentuated. My sensitivity to the contours of the landscape is greater and I see more details than I had perceived previously. Why is that? I think part of it has to do with the fact that I am no longer focused on the utility of the pasture. When the livestock were there, I didn't see it the same way. Now it seems that there are little hills that have grown, though it's only my perception that has changed.

RJ: I want to come back to a religious question. You come out of a Protestant tradition, but long ago you left behind the traditional dogma of Christianity. You don't believe in a creator God, but you use the term creation to talk about the world. You hold onto that term, even though you have let go of some other religious terms.

WJ: I think this is where the idea of God as emergence and creativity comes in handy. It's all flow, all change, all movement. Nothing holds still. Stones dragged down by those glaciers and deposited in Kansas look to us like they haven't changed. But those stones are also wearing away due to the ordinary weather and elements. Nothing holds still, and that is creation, that is the act of creating. Some may think I have too expansive a definition of creativity, but I think it helps us understand ourselves and the world, and where we fit in that world. We can't avoid being participants in creating the Creation.

Note

- ¹ This interview is based on a transcript of a podcast which will be included in *From the Ground Up*, to be published as an open-access online book by New Perennials Publishing later in 2022. It has been edited for concision and clarity.

References

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