

**Boulding on Boulding and other things:
Poems by Kenneth E. Boulding**

Read by
George R. McDowell

Sources:

Kenneth E. Boulding, 1963. "Towards a Pure Theory of Threat Systems." *AER*, May.

Kenneth Boulding. 1962. "The Feather River Anthology or "Holy Water"" Unpublished paper, University of California, Berkley, Water Resources Archives.

Kenneth E. Boulding. 1993. *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*. 1993. Pendle Hill Publications, Willingford, PA.

I. On Science, Economics, and Teaching:

Sonnet for Science

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*. 16 March 1992

Even great scientists have made mistakes,
Which others – often pupils – have corrected;
A science at large expects the unexpected,
Unusual accidents and lucky breaks,
But what it cannot tolerate is fakes.
Lies and deceit, once they have been detected,
Are not forgiven. Totally ejected
From the profession are the found-out rakes.

Another principle that must pervade
The realm of science is that change in views
Must never come from those who threats will use;
Only the power of evidence must persuade.
And freedom to explore and to debate
Must be enjoyed, or science will stagnate.

Sonnet for the Noösphere

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*. 28 March and 13 March 1992

I

All my life I have been teacher and taught,
Working to transfer into other minds
Ideas and images that searching finds
In the wide landscape of my inner thought.
And this to me has much contentment brought.
I could have lived long lives of other kinds,
And yet, somehow, the stream of life that winds
Through space and time has not borne me for naught.

The final purpose of the universe

Is not for us to know: but here and now
We know that we can nourish and endow,
From the rich content of our own mind's purse,
 The knowledge universe that grows and spreads
 Through past, present, and future human heads.

II

Our precious earth is made of many spheres,
Rocks, water, life, and the human race;
Each interacts with each, each has a place,
Endlessly changing with the passing years.
But now, something remarkable appears;
A sphere of knowledge, images that trace
Through human minds the patterns that lace
The real world; small?--large! And distant?--near!

But knowledge, like all things, passes away,
As we forget, and as we ourselves die,
And must be born, in young minds, constantly,
By teaching, learning, thinking, testing, play.
 And to extinction will frail knowledge go,
 Unless they who know, teach, and who teach, know.

Sonnet for Economics

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*. 24 June 1992

Economist for all my working days
I should by this time roughly know what's best
For humankind, and put to some small test
My colleagues' images of yeas and nays.
The economy, however is a maze;
To map it is a very complex quest.
Even its history mostly must be guessed
So, over this ignorance we raise

A fantasy of markets with perfection,
Mistaking charm and elegance for truth;
But Error has a penetrating tooth
That bites when we go in a false direction.
 And if our theories are mainly fictions,
 It's most unwise to make exact predictions!

On Reading A Biographical Dictionary of Dissenting Economists

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*. 24 March 1992

Reading about the life and work of thinkers,
Even within the walls of my own field,
I must to a rather sad conviction yield,

That there is much I don't see through my blinkers.
And even though some thoughts out there are stinkers,
The knowledge that within my mind is sealed
Is such a tiny part of what's revealed
In all five billion minds. But my mind tinkers

With an idea that only what is true
Is good. Yet Error skillfully embeds
Itself so quickly in so many heads
That there is much I'm glad I never knew,
And I can add, perhaps, a little whine,
That so few other heads know what's in mine!

II. Clues to some of what was in Boulding's head, on social organization, policy, motives, and resource problems.

From "Towards a Pure Theory of Threat Systems" AER, 1963

Four things that give mankind a shove
Are threats, exchange, persuasion, love;
But taken in the wrong proportions
These give us cultural abortions.
For threats bring manifold abuses
In games where everybody loses;
Exchange enriches every nation
But leads to dangerous alienation;
Persuaders organize their brothers
But fool themselves as well as others;
And love, with longer pull than hate,
Is slow indeed to propagate

Reflections on the State, Especially the State of California
From "The Feather River Anthology or "Holy Water"" 1962.

A curious creature is the State;
It must persuade – but may dictate;
It has an intermediate station
Between the County and the Nation,
That is, a sort of middle level
Between the Deep Sea and the Devil.
It is its custom and it's wont
To do what other people don't,
Its functions, therefore, though official,
Are always somewhat interstitial.

On the General Absence of People-Centered Policies

From "The Feather River Anthology or "Holy Water"" 1962.

The Army Corps of Engineers
Insists on building Dams and Weirs,
The Reclamation men assume
That every desert ought to bloom.
The wildlife people often wish
That all the world were game and fish.
The conservationist's a whiz
At keeping nature as she is.
The church is measured by its steeple –
And no one gives a dam for people!

Ode, on the General Subject of Water

From "The Feather River Anthology or "Holy Water"" 1962.

Water is far from a simple commodity,
Water's a sociological oddity
Water's a pasture for science to forage in,
Water's a mark of our dubious origin,
Water's a link with a distant futurity,
Water's a symbol of ritual purity,
Water is politics, water's religion,
Water is just about anyone's pigeon
Water is frightening, water's endearing,
Water's a lot more than mere engineering,
Water is tragical, water is comical,
Water is far from the Pure Economical,
So studies of water, though free from aridity
Are apt to produce a good deal of turbidity.

From "The Feather River Anthology or "Holy Water"" 1962.

Remarked the Bureau to the Corps
"Confine yourself to flood and war"
Said Engineers to Reclamation
"You are obsessed by irrigation".

This acrimonious debate
Brings water to the thirsty State,
For mutual recriminations
Are soothed by large appropriations,
And each Congressional committee
Is moved by pork, if not pity.

The danger, it is plain to see,
Comes when the Agencies agree,

For what they might agree about
Is apt to cause an Urban Drought,
By so pre-empting nature's juices
To strictly vegetable uses.

III. Reflections on his life as an academic and scholar

Sonnet for an Oasis

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*.

3 January 1992

Long in the country of the active mind
I have been traveling with tireless feet,
Seeking my fellow travelers to greet
With tales of all the wonders there to find.
And though in devious ways the paths may wind,
Still there are many grateful pastures sweet
And moments when the journey seems complete
When all converge on points that Truth assigned.

And sometimes there are lonely deserts where
I shouted into emptiness, until
Some caravan appeared over the hill
And saved me from aloneness and despair,
And so I find my intellectual place is
Not the whole universe, but an oasis.

Sonnet for Self –Pity

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*.

16 January 1992

I have built up great castles in the sand,
That wind and waves have swiftly leveled low,
And in the bustling crowd I loudly blow
The trumpet of my thoughts, without a hand
To clap, or ear to hear in all the land.
My words and writings like a river flow
That disappears into the sand below,
A great supply for which there's no demand.

Ah well! Perhaps I am before my time,
And after I am safely gone from earth
Some prying scholar will expose the worth
Of truths that were not noticed in my prime,
But yet, whate'er the future thinks I've done,
Blowing my trumpet has been lots of fun!

Sonnet for Praise

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*.

17 January 1992

Costs we know fairly well, but benefits
Are vague, obscure. Money, we must confess,
Has a nice quality of more or less,
Even when in a distant bank it sits.
But the net worth of praise takes all our wits
To calculate; and it is hard to guess
What people mean by honors, when they dress
Them up in gowns, hoods, calligraphic writs.

Perhaps the best reward is just a smile
A flash of recognition of a passer-by,
The handshake in a warm and friendly style.
 Yet all these fade before the satisfaction
 Of turnings one's potential into action.

To My Desktop

From *SONNETS From Later Life 1981 – 1993*.

5-6 May 1992

My desktop is an appalling clutter
Of things unread, unanswered, every one
Reminding of things I haven't done,
Of thought unthought and words I didn't utter.
And all I ever seem to do is putter.
I deal with some things, then what seems a ton
Of mail comes in – I'm tempted then to run,
My mind feels like an overflowing gutter.

I can't decide whether I need more time
Or do I need a more determined will?
But change in Will's an order hard to fill,
And nothing stops the clock's relentless chime.
 But whether I can find the will – oh, well!
 That is a story only time can tell.