

Living and loving as part of the whole: an ecological perspective

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Sacred Name and Shooting Star

Some years ago now I was a member of the Dreamweavers Lodge, a group of people working with Native American medicine wheel teachings. To what extent these were genuine teachings, and to what extent a white European can engage is them, is an important question I will sidestep for this talk. This was a ceremonial path: we engaged in a series of personal ceremonies, starting with the Night on the Mountain, a 24 hour vision quest which I completed memorably on Ramsey Island off the coast of Wales; and proceeding through a variety of challenges to the Sacred Name ceremony which I will talk about in a moment. We also worked ceremonies as a group, including healing circles, sweat lodges and an annual Rainbow Dance. It was an intense and embodied practice. The Sacred Name ceremony came at the end of the first cycle of personal ceremonies. The idea was that by this time one would have discovered one's core gifts and qualities, one's 'sacred essence' maybe, and would be finding a Name to represent it. This name is not to be used in everyday, being between oneself and Great Spirit, but would be used to draw power in ceremony. The purpose of the ceremony was to confirm and bestow this Name.

So, as I was instructed, I collected all the paraphernalia—crystals and icons representing my allies and teachers in the directions of the Medicine Wheel. And I had a good sense of what my sacred name might be, although it had not fully firmed up. I took these, along with my Wolfheart staff, up to the summit of a substantial hill in mid-Wales in the middle of the night, set out them out in a Medicine Wheel and settled down in the middle with my prayers.

The first stage of the ceremony was to go round the circle and call the Name in the different directions of the Wheel and listen for a response. If and when this response was positive—that there was an experience of a reply—the second

stage was to conjure a sign from the Universe—in my case I was told to conjure a shooting star. Conjuring involved a formula of words, which I learned by heart, that would build power and call the star, but you may imagine that I was also a bit sceptical. I went into this very full-heartedly, but really quite wonderingly.

My first attempt at going round the circle and calling my Name produced no result of any kind at all. There was a dull silence at all levels. So I returned crestfallen to the centre of my Medicine Wheel, and I think I went to sleep for a bit because I dreamed a new version of the name. And the second time I called my name in the eight directions, it had an altogether different feel, as if something was stirring.

So I went back to the centre, took my staff, chanted the conjuring, built a spiral of power, called out my Name and, as I was instructed, pulled my staff across the sky from East to West. And then I lay back to see what happened. Still by no means convinced by all this.

And just as my head touched the ground a bright star streaked across the sky above me from East to West. I was wide awake, fully present. This was a real star that I experience as incontrovertibly responded to my call. I was blown away, to put it mildly and after collecting my allies and teachers went back down to rejoin the Lodge in a most extraordinary state. To this day my hair stands on end when I tell this story.

Now when I first had this experience I thought it was a private story; that it was between me and the cosmos; that I might seem to be boasting about my spiritual or shamanic capacities. But increasingly I have regarded this experience as a teaching that I should share with others. For this is an extraordinary thing to experience, which cuts through everything we take for granted about the nature of the world. How could this happen? How utterly extraordinary! What does this mean for the nature of this world we inhabit?

And it raises for me all kinds of questions about the nature of our participation in the planet and in the universe that I would like to explore with you.

The question: living as part of the whole

It seems to me that we are going to hell in a handcart, so to speak. I am not going to rehearse what is happening to our planet. I confess I fear the worst. And I believe fundamentally, to quote David Orr, that

“The disordering of ecological systems and of the great biogeochemical cycles of the earth reflects a prior disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities, and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind. Ultimately, then, the ecological crisis concerns how we think and the institutions that purport to shape and refine the capacity to think.”
(Orr, 1994:2)

My own take on this is that at some very profound level we in the West experience ourselves as outsiders to the planet: apart from, rather than a part of. Bruno Latour writes of “two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of humans on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other” (Latour, 1993:10-11) Even if we no longer consciously believe that we were placed on earth by a creator god in his image (sic), my sense is that underlying our perceptions of and thinking about our place is informed by this sense of separateness which has long been a part of the Western worldview but was intensified by a shift in worldview which started some 300–400 years ago.

Thomas Berry, Christian priest and geologist, one of the great ecological thinkers of our time, traces the rupture back to the period of the Black Death in Europe, a traumatic period in which trust in the natural world was shattered. Wikipedia tells us that it killed 30%-60% of the population, for no reason that was comprehensible at that time. The consequence, Berry argues, was development in two directions. On the one hand there was an increased religious emphasis on redemption **out** of this tragic world: we were all born in sin in a fallen world.

What was neglected was the other side of the Christian teaching concerning: the “revelatory import” of the natural world as demonstrating and revealing god’s divine presence (Berry, 1988:125-126). What Matthew Fox calls Original Blessing (Fox, 1983b). This revelatory perspective can be found, for example, in Meister Eckhart’s statement that “every creature of a word of god and a book about god” (Fox, 1983a) the kind of revelatory perspective. So an emphasis on redemptive spirituality, out of this world, so to speak contributes to a view that life on earth is important.

This made possible second development, which and increased emphasis on control and exploitation of the natural world, since this was no longer seen primarily as part of a divine presence. So Bacon established the link between knowledge and power, and told us to study nature empirically, that we must put nature on the rack and wrest her secrets from her. Galileo told us that nature was open to our gaze if we understood it was written in the language of mathematics. Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* made a radical separation between human and other modes of being; and Newton formulated an extraordinarily powerful view essentially of the universe as a determinate machine obeying causal laws (See Skolimowski, 1994; Toulmin, 1990). And despite, quantum mechanics, string theory, complexity theory, this remains the underpinning sense of reality of our Western world. And I think this is the underlying sense of reality of nearly all of us, despite our Buddhism, or shamanism. For as our first speaker pointed out, Buddhism in the West has linked into our psychology rather than into our ecology.

Let me tell you another little story to illustrate our strongly we are programmed with this idea we are outsiders. I must have been somewhere between five and seven, and I remember, as my mother prepared my bath and I took my clothes off, asking her what my belly button was for. I distinctly remember the steam arising from that old green postwar utilitarian bathtub as she explained to me. When god has finished making babies, he puts them up on a shelf ready to be born, and he goes along the line and makes sure that they are all finished, saying

'you're done, and you're done...' poking you in the tummy and making your belly button. Clearly at some level I believed her.

This worldview channels our thinking in two important ways. It tells us the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter, operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose or meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans alone have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. This split between humanity and nature, and the arrogation of all mind to humans, is what Weber meant by the disenchantment of the world. Thomas Berry again:

Consistently we have difficulty in accepting the human as an integral part of the earth community. We see ourselves as a transcendent mode of being. We don't really belong here. But if we are here by some strange destiny we are the source of all rights and all values" (Berry, 1999:104)

But we also know this is not true. We know that we humans are born of the earth (indeed of the cosmos) and evolved as part of her development. As Alan Watts put it so beautifully, "We do not 'come into' this world; we come *out* of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean 'waves' so the universe 'peoples'" (Watts, 1989:9) (and of course also tigers and trees and beetles, and mountains). Living as part of the whole starts from the essential insight that we are already participants: we are part of the cosmos, always in relation with each other and the more than human world, glorious yet temporary centres of awareness and action in an interconnected whole. In a sense this is close to the idea that we are already Buddhas, yet somehow we have forgotten this.

And Thomas Berry suggests we are not so much separate beings on the earth as a dimension of the earth (Berry, 1999).

So what to do about the ecological crisis? It can be helpful to distinguish between light green and dark green responses to the sustainability challenge: Bright

green environmentalism is based in the belief that sustainable innovation is the path to lasting prosperity; that we must harness human inventiveness and adaptability to the challenge. Dark green perspectives argue that somehow we need to make a very different turn, to change our minds about how we are and what the earth is about. It is the approach of deep ecology, bioregionalism, ecofeminism (Steffen, 2009). The question that seems to me to be of some urgency, and that parallels the important practical work of reducing our footprint on the planet, is how we might create an in-depth, everyday and almost taken-for-granted experience of ourselves as participants, part-of rather than apart-from Gaia and the community of beings on the planet. As Charles Taylor points out in his book *A Secular Age* (2007), in the Middle Ages there was an 'immediate certainty' about the existence of god, that the natural world testified to divine purpose and action, that god was essential for the very existence of society and so on. God was simply part of lived understanding. I wonder if we could make our experience of ourselves as participants in a living, self-regulating planet, or Gaia, if you prefer, taken for granted in the same kind of way? To supplement the inventiveness of bright green with a deeper realization of dark green?

Several years ago I have the privilege of visiting Thomas Berry at his home in South Carolina. The first thing he did was take me out for a beer, and then very kindly put me up in a local Howard Johnson hotel. In the morning, I waited for him to join me for breakfast, sitting on the little low wall outside the hotel reception in the autumn sunshine. He parked his car, walked over to me, sat on the wall next to me and immediately launched into an explanation of the nature of the cosmos and the beings that are a part of it. He explained, against the sweet background of this Southern fall, that the universe itself and every being in the universe has both psychic/spiritual and physical/material dimensions, an intangible inner form as well as well as a tangible physical structure, and that these two aspects must always go together and be understood together. He also told me that the universe is the primary reality and since "the universe brings us into being with all our knowledge and cultural achievements, then the universe

must be an intellect-producing, aesthetic producing, and intimacy producing process” (Berry, 1999:81).

Thus for him (and for many others) the devastation of the earth is the consequence of this deep cultural pathology which separates these two dimensions, seeing the universe and thus the earth as purely material. We need to move from a human-centred to an earth-centred norm of reality and value, and that is the only way we can be truly human and play our proper part in life on earth. Since we have evolved with and out of the universe, the universe itself has an intelligent, self-creating, intimate dimension. As Jorge Ferrer, who has articulated a participatory spirituality, puts it, the human

arises in the evolution of the cosmos, is an expression of the being of the cosmos, is the cosmos rendered self-aware, the perspectives we bring enable us to directly participate in the self-disclosure of the world (Ferrer, 2002)

If you like, we are a part of the cosmos capable of reflecting on itself and coming to know itself.

So I sat on the wall next to him and tried to absorb what at that time was an extraordinary account of reality: the universe is a “community of subjects, not a collection of objects.” And if the destruction of life on earth is the outcome of “the radical discontinuity established between the human and the non human, then the renewal of life on the planet by be based on the continuity between human and other than human in a single integral community” (Berry, 1999:80).

I have been taking this exploration a little further and trying to get into a Taoist perspective on the natural world. I thought it would help to step outside a Western perspective on ecology. What struck me most as I began to read Chinese perspectives (and I make no claim at all to be an expert) is the experience of a continuity of being and some would say the absence of any creation myths: the universe is not seen as created *ex nihilo* according to a creator’s plan, but as a “spontaneously self generating life process” (Weiming, 1998:106). As Roger

Ames and David Hall put it, it is an-archic, without founding principles or *arche* outside of its own process of becoming (Ames & Hall, 2003). What would it be like to be brought up like that, rather than with god's poke in the belly?

Let me try to struggle with you publicly with some of these ideas. On the one hand we have the Western perspective that places an emphasis on a world of distinct objects which are fundamentally inert (no subjectivity) but operate according to external laws; in contrast the Daoist perspective celebrates the insistent particularity of items comprising together the totality: "particular 'things' that are always in process are in fact processual events, and are thus intrinsically related to all other events" (Hall, 1989). We can contrast the rational concept of order of the West—in which order realizes a presupposed pattern or structure in which individual parts are replaceable; with the Daoist view of an aesthetic order that is composed of irreplaceable elements, an order arising from their intense particularity and their interaction. The particular form that arises is a 'regularity and cadence achieved by nature... the harmony consequent upon the collaboration of intrinsically related particulars as perceived from some particular perspective (Ames, 1989).

Roger Ames has written of the need to put the 'Te back into Taoism (1989). The Dao can be seen as Becoming-itself, the field of potentiality not in the sense of a single ordered cosmos, but as containing all possibilities. De can be seen as the 'particular focus or intrinsic excellence of a thing'. Dao is the field or conditions for a particular De. Of the ten thousand things chapter 51 of the Dao De Ching says

Dao engenders them

And De nourishes and rears them.

Things give them shape

And conditions bring them to completion.

Thus, all the myriad things revere Dao and honour De.

Why Dao is revered and De honoured

Is because they are constantly "self-so-ing"

And not because of anyone's mandate.

So the order of things as seen from Daoism is not a rational order based on a divine plan or on scientific laws of nature, a 'preassigned pattern of relatedness'. Rather it is an aesthetic order arising from the self-organization of particular elements. An aesthetic order is in no way predetermined but arises from the uniqueness and spontaneity of particulars in collaboration in an emergent complex pattern.

Let us have another look at this issue of rationality. Hall (1989) points out that there is, within western philosophy, a range of critiques of rationality: Critical thinkers point out that so-called rationality is actually primarily in the service of domination and control; postmodernists that rationality is self referentially inconsistent; feminists that much rational argument is defined in terms of the white European male and thus serves a limited view of the human. Rationality, while claiming to be objective, is widely criticised as supporting means based and exploitative thinking and the interests of particular groups.

Hall takes this further. Remember that in the Daoist view order is necessarily seen from a perspective, his argument it is that recourse to principles of rationality will necessarily be anthropocentric, and in the service of narrow human needs, because it is informed and constrained by the very categories—physical, logical, linguistic and conceptual—which define the humans species and through which we articulate our world, our needs and our interests. Rational order presumes a single world vision, and that vision must necessarily be cast in human terms.

"...the attempt to be reasonable is ipso factor an attempt to establish the dominance of the human of the natural order" (Hall, 1989:105)

To give an example, the very notion of 'the environment' is a rational human construct that has become part of common discourse in response to the

perceived planetary tragedy. But as Maurice Ash pointed out long ago (1992), the idea of 'the environment' first of all defines the more than human world in terms of its separateness from the human; places the human at the centre; defines it in terms of human needs, as the human environment. We seek to 'save our planet' when we actually seek to save ourselves and our current way of being. And when someone, such as James Lovelock, speaks from a wider Gaian perspective, we think he has gone a bit to far—either mad or bad, or maybe both. We continually place ourselves first.

It is not that there is not a 'real world' for the Daoist; it is simply that the real world is not a world of objects: the things of the world are empty

So we need to develop a way of making sense of our world that does not assume a single world vision: to follow Blake "May god us keep from Single Vision and Newtons sleep". Hall turns to a Daoist perspective to begin to articulate an aesthetic order in which the ordering arises from the intense particularity of the parts and their particular qualities of interaction rather than from laws or patterns that are external.

Such a perspective

- a) A cosmological theory or natural parity, that denies ontological privilege to any perspective: divine, human, material, ideal
- b) This in particular excludes anthropocentrism, and ways of understanding and action based solely on human experience; a way of describing actions which is not based on rationality and end-means. Tim addressed this in interesting ways yesterday
- c) A language which is non-referential; denotative reference is avoided; doesn't create an inventory of objects as separate entities. It is a language of deference (See Hall, 1989:106)

While referential language characterizes an event or object through naming the individual or the class, deferential language yields to the particular perspective

of those things we seek to appreciate. It is thus paved with metaphor, an allusive language which “celebrates a processive, transitory world of myriad transformations that cannot, or should not, be fixed”. The Daoist uses language in such a way as “to give way to” that which is met, seeks not to pin them down through naming but draws on vagueness and allusive metaphor to engage the world in its transitoriness and particularity. There are no Beings behind the beings of the world, only these particulars (Hall, 2001)

Jonathan Bate (Bate, 2000) argues that Keats does just this in his poem *Autumn*:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.

He describes this as “a meditation on how human culture can only function through links and reciprocal relations with nature”; as “a poem of networks, links, bonds, and correspondences. ...

Mist and fruitfulness, bosom-friend and sun, load and bless, are not ‘naturally’ linked ... But Keats makes the links seem natural: the progression of one thing to another is anything but violent or surprising. The effect of this naturalization within the poem is to create contiguity between all its elements... The world of the poem thus comes to resemble a well regulated ecosystem... biodiversity is a key to survival”(Bate, 2000-107)

Bate argues that there is no transcendent yearning as in Keats earlier poems, no "I", no split between mind and substance, the poem embraces immanence and the self is dissolved into the ecosystem. So "the poem itself is an image of ecological wholeness which may grant the reader a sense of being-at-home-in-the-world" (2000:109)

So what can we take from this to help build an experience of humans as "living as part of the whole"?

1. Take seriously the idea that our western perspective, arising as it does from ideas of divine creation, or one order expressed in scientific laws, is necessarily anthropocentric. That rationality is necessarily couched in terms that define the human condition. We cannot think our way out of the mess we have created.
2. As a counterpoint to this learn to develop an attention for the intense particularity of 'things'; to experience their event-ful-ness; their interconnectedness; and relation to the whole. In Daoist terms appreciate how the excellence of De arises from and return to the field of Dao.
3. Recognize the distancing consequences of our denotative language, how it creates a world of separate objects, and cultivate an aesthetic language of deference

In practical terms I suggest this might include disciplines along the following lines

1. Quieting the mind and developing tranquillity through meditation... as a means of quieting the categorizing mind
2. Attending to all the senses and noticing how they shift and change
3. Approaching the beings of the world with reverence, requesting permission to enter their space and engage. This is a practice we learned from Henryk Skolimowski, and is a means of acknowledging the internality, self creativity of all beings (Skolimowski, 1994)
4. In depth detained observation of the particular in the manner of Goethian science(Bortoft, 1986); drawing, photographing, spontaneous writing

5. Placing the particular in the context of a perceived and/or imaginative whole as Harding suggests in his meditations on Gaia (Harding, 2006).
6. Beholding with awe
7. Listening (with all ears) for a response
8. Attending to synchronicities
9. Staying with what emerges rather than hastening on
10. Noticing impulses in the body and following them
11. Ritual and ceremony: from bowing, prostration to vision quest and beyond
12. Imitation and/or response through stance, gesture, vocal expression
13. Hunting, gathering, eating

Finally then, from Wendell Berry

When despair grows in me
 and I wake in the middle of the night at the least sound
 in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
 I go and lie down where the wood drake
 rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
 I come into the peace of wild things
 who do not tax their lives with forethought
 of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
 And I feel above me the day-blind stars
 waiting for their light. For a time
 I rest in the grace of the world, and am free. (Wendell Berry,
 1998:30)

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