A Lifeworld with Sentience

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bride
long
narrow
dress
tightens
strangles
her
life
calls for the night meadow
through the large open window
comes fresh evening air
and the lure of white lunar light
a cool drop begins gentle spray
inviting her out to bathe
she turns her face
to the nightsky
drinks
jewelled
rain
which dissolves
her old gown
drizzle now washes skin
tingles and gleams
nightgreen caresses her feet
breasts shimmer with tender drops
from sentient moonlight hands
tall elms hold out long arms
buffalo creeks reveal a wide ocean
waving new life for her now
cleansed by the clouds
arrayed by the congregation around her
she begins her journey
in the sunrise
up the aisle

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David Abram, in *The spell of the sensuous*, (1996), a passionate work regarding the interrelationships of our bodies and our cognitive selves with the natural world, writes that “any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me” (p. 67). He declares that we need to enter into reciprocal communication with our surroundings (1996, p. 67), that we need to feel, to hear, to see the earth and its vegetation, breezes, everything around us, in order to understand and appreciate the interconnectedness of our world and what the complexity of these components can bring to us via all senses, including the sixth and the seventh senses. In *The spell of the sensuous*, Abram touches bodies and environments and invites reciprocal sentient communication. His finger on the leaf slides into the creation of neural music. He can sing the birds into being and hear them singing for him. Reciprocal embodied narration can sing the land into being for him. And for all human beings. Even teachers and students.

The fundamental emphasis in our traditional Western education of the Cartesian dichotomies of mind/body, mental/physical, and knower/knowledge have long tended to consider scholarly knowing as that which emerges from a mind regarded as being above the body, from a mind which has conquered the lowly influence of the body, from a mind which reaches far above the earth on which we walk. Our education has considered higher learning as that which is outside of the concrete levels with which we start as infants, above that which comes from the senses of our hands, our feet, our eyes or any of our physical components. The Western goals in education have primarily been to work towards the abstract, to encourage the use of our higher knowledge for superior management and control of that which is or those who are beneath us and around us. Education has not taught us to consider the influence of our body as a reality in the construction of our knowledge. We have not usually learned in our education, even if we have had an awareness of it, that our minds and our bodies are continuously interdependent in their...
creation of thought and insight.

Huston Smith, in a 1972 publication entitled *Earth might be fair: Reflections on ethics, religion and ecology*, edited by Ian G. Barbour, writes regarding the need for a new consciousness in our world, one which will change the presumption that "nature has no claims, only uses" (p. 63). He says we need to reassess our Western disengagement from nature. Smith notes further that even our intelligence needs to be deconditioned (p. 72), that Chinese Taoism with its regard for all manifestations of our environment as holy in essence (p. 78) is needed in the West to reinterpret our relationships with each other and the natural world.

A few years later, in 1977, Fritjof Capra’s work *The tao of physics: An exploration of the parallels between modern physics and Eastern mysticism*, is published. With this work, Capra reaches into a new interpretation of the sciences as per Taoism, and celebrates an intensely engaging relationship with the natural world. Capra returns with several more works including a major publication in 2002, *The hidden connections: integrating the biological, cognitive and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability*. With this work, Capra builds a web of hopeful life for our environment with revelations of intricate connections among all the components of the world around us and within us. In this research, his presentation of the Santiago Theory of Cognition, first developed by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, states that a perfect metaphor for the complementary aspects of mind and matter, or cognition, is the *breath of life* (2002, p. 37-38).

In her 1992 publication entitled *Women who run with the wolves: Myths and stories of the wild woman archetype*, Clarissa Pinkola Estes reveals her perceptions of how a woman can attempt to reconnect with her long lost wild earth nature, instinct and intuition, and magic love. Estes tells a collection of stories and myths regarding women which have been recovered from any cultures and eras, and writes her interpretations of these for the contemporary reader. Through her presentation and interpretation of historic oral myths regarding wild woman, she “elucidate[s] the nature of women” (p. 13) by bringing together natural earth and oral culture.

I feel that the acknowledgement of the natural, the physical as interconnected with the intuitive, the non-physical, assist in greatly expanding potential for the creation and affirmation of learnings. The complexity of sentience as a direct source of embodied learning and living has been ignored by too many educators for too long. If we learn to permit the emergence of complex sentience and to acknowledge perceptions which it evokes, our learnings can burgeon. These learnings may at times include those which have frequently been denounced by education, or accepted by traditional Western religions only when the results fall in line with the ruling religious creeds. For example, the traditional interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus is accepted by Western *status quo*, but the
magic of old world cultures and new age interests in extra-sensory perceptions and auras are usually rejected.

An open, inviting relationship with all of our senses, and a continuous exploration of the interconnectedness with what we discover and with what we are consciously aware, can, I believe, assist the evolution of the creativity and the intelligence of all life. We can learn to tune in to all of our senses as we learn and teach if we dare to become aware of the components, the everyday aspects of our interrelated life around us, within us. We need to make efforts to study not only the cultured orchid, but also the wild prairie rose, or the common dandelion on our path with concentration and intensity, to look at it, to touch it, to study its environment, to listen to its interconnected movements with the summer breeze, to smell it slowly in its interrelated environments, to enjoy the bumble bee’s momentary visit with a smiling step or two aside.

We can take moments to listen to our inner memory responses and our body’s interactions with and feelings for that flower in bloom, to research components of its botanical, ecological, spiritual and cultural environment, to talk about this experience with our students, with our colleagues, with our friends, with ourselves in writing or whatever form of communication our body and mind comfortably interact with and study and breathe. I believe that this activity can enter any component of our lifeworlds, for the air in front of us that we breathe, for the relationship with friend and family and stranger, for study of a radical scientific theory, an evocative analogy in a university lecture, as well as for the recognition and concentrated study of an enigmatic feeling or aura which may take time to bring towards clear understanding and articulation. This openness to sentience can begin a process that enables us to see with, through and beyond our cultural, ethical, religious, and academic upbringing, thus enlarging and intensifying the reception and development of a body of knowledge for us. An increased interest in awareness can also open more of our ponderous, imposing universe to us, showing us interconnections among all components and beings, from the miniscule to the massive, of our planet. We may well find that even small fragments of time devoted to sentience reception and study can begin to develop for us a new clarity in consciousness, in our awareness of these complex interconnections. These efforts can begin the development of a deep personal and professional love and devotion to the saving and restoring of our planet and all its inhabitants, including our embodied selves.

My own love with and for the natural world began to develop in early childhood on a lush southern Manitoba farm. For me, the caressing wave of tall prairie grass was loving and comforting. The flow of Buffalo Creek on my grandparents’ farm continuously reminded me that other bodies of water lay ahead to which I could and would travel. Through my experiences in adult life, I have touched the acacias of Krakow, washed my
face as my ancestors did, in the River Neva of St. Petersburg. I have eaten delicious fruit from the huge mango tree beside our school compound house during a teaching year in Ghana, listened to the aspens of the Assiniboine Forest when I returned to Winnipeg, and sung with the orchestral flow of the beautiful South Saskatchewan River upon a move to Saskatoon. This past year with doctoral studies at the University of Alberta, I’ve begun to acquaint myself with the black spruce tree guardians of the fierce North Saskatchewan River in Edmonton.

This relationship with the natural world has continuously shown me its power, not only for stimulating knowledge development and for creating love and thought, but also for absorbing pain and reconfiguring stress into insights for new living. The metaphor of the opening poem is an attempt to show the love I feel from the natural world around me and my love for it. I wrote the poem a number of years ago but my current doctoral studies brought it to me again as an interconnection of the work of David Abram, learning, teaching, sentience and my lifeworld. Today, the orchid, the wild prairie rose and the dandelion live in the touch of my hands as a beautiful bouquet I enjoy through my continuous union with the natural world.

References


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About the Author

Martha E. Zacharias has lectured for some years in Saskatoon at University of Saskatchewan, College of Education, in the areas of Language Arts and English Education, and she has been active in the Saskatchewan arts and cultural scene. She is currently focusing on the interrelationships among sentience, consciousness and imagination for her doctoral research in the Department of Secondary Education, University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta.

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