

"If we learn to tell the story of the place, then we may find our place in that story" Thomas Berry.

Discuss this from the perspective of an ecological self, including ethical positions that in your view add value to place.

'At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons.'
C. G. Jung

Last February, the second module of the Master Ecology and Spirituality took place at Schumacher College, in particular at the Elmhirst Centre of Dartington Hall. This module was headlined as The Ecological Self, in which, during the three weeks of its duration, we were immersed in a deep (wintery) inquiry. "We" here refers to a small group of not even a dozen students that, by the end of the three weeks, felt more like a family than a group of classmates. We journeyed together in the inquiry of the ecological self, co-creating the course as its growing was taking place. At the heart of this journey laid a dual process: an almost magical communion with others and an individual unique experience. As Eve Annecke predicted in her welcoming to the module, our journey was going to include and be composed of a mix of experiences that we weren't yet able to imagine, but that for sure would require of us 'readiness, open heartedness' as well as 'courage and humour'. And this we all endeavoured to deliver.

As the module was unfolding between the ecological self in community by Freya Mathews (1996), the one by John Seed (2006) and Arne Naess (1973), the experiential shared one by Joanna Macy (2009), all that 'on the importance of a certain slowness' of Paul Cilliers (2007) and the voice-over of Stephen Harding travelling on the consciousness evolution to lead us to the 'Final Participation' (2009); we were asked to answer to the following enunciate, which was the initial version of the question we are invited to reflect on this paper:

In considering the question "which place has chosen you as its human", create a response in which you imagine what this place might need you to take into account should you live there.

To answer this question I decided not to talk about my beloved Penyagolosa Mountain, which I climbed for the first time when I was only some months old on the shoulders of my dad and where I've come back to almost every year during the last 28 years of my life; neither will I talk about the highest peak of the Pyrenees mountain range, the Aneto, where I lost myself and found myself many a times; neither about the peaks of el Matagalls, el Turó de l'Home o les Agudes in the Natural Park of el Montseny; the holy mountain in the Himalayas Drilbu-ri; the Keylong monastery above 5000 meters high or the summit of Triund over Dharamkot. I will also not talk either about the river Matarranya and its deep throats, its cold water that steals your voice when it's not needed; I will not talk about the powerful waterfalls born from thawing snow in the highest mountains; nor about the fast waters of the Asian rivers joining

with the indefatigable monsoon rains; or about the hair-raising silence of the Mooloolah river in the aboriginal land of the Gubi Gubi mob in Diamond Valley. No. All these places have touched me in the most intimate way as they have other countless humans; expanding my sense of self with the vastest boundaries' dissipation far beyond the power of words can tempt to describe. I found myself going to these places when I felt lost or in a transition period, when I needed to step out and leave everything behind, finding beautiful experiences, as well as also scary and dangerous ones, which taught me the deep meaning, and also the ridiculous meaning, of holding onto my identity.

But here, in touch now with the intimacy of my most profound being – this is, in the Morning Room of the Elmhirst Centre and with this group of people –, I have decided to talk about a place that has chosen me before I could ever visit it or fall in love with its qualities and defects. Probably some bonds from past lives or ancestors before connect me to that land in a way I cannot even intuit. Or maybe not. I will talk about this place, as it's one with my body. A place whose roots follow me across the globe. A place that I can see parts of in any landscape, no matter how far away I actually am from it, or how different it looks. Everything appearing to my eyes and touching my soul is somehow an extension of this place.

This place is called la Vall d'Alba. It owns its name to its Arabic ancestors and its peculiar white light. It is not a coincidence that my second name is also Alba, Maria Alba. It is full of almond trees and the most fertile red soil I have ever seen; the sky there seems bigger than elsewhere, and its blueness and light seems to be out of the palette of the rainbow. I have felt this place talking to me in different ways: inviting me to climb its trees, swim in its rivers, build a hut with old branches and leaves picked from the floor or just filling the air with my laugh, then there is also the aroma of an evening meal cooked on the fire that will be shared with friends and family. But I have also felt the crying of this place when the small villages in the area have, gradually, been losing most of its neighbours, until the community has been reduced to none and does not really exist anymore. I have heard the screams of this place when its breathing was contaminated by big industrial factories settling in the surrounding areas. And most of all, I feel the loneliness of this place in my own loneliness.

It has been only through these deep experiences, the beautiful and the difficult ones, that I can deeply question myself and the world about the justice or injustice resulting from the changes happening to this land. My philosophy of being, thinking, and acting in the world embodies the questioning I've gone through while experiencing myself in this place. In the words of Arne Naess, I owe my sense of 'deep ecology' to this space. My 'ecosophy' has the shape of la Vall d'Alba and my 'ecological self' is born and dies there (Naess 2005). I've learnt and keep learning my ecological wisdom from what I saw happening in this place. The history of this land has shaped my ethics and understanding. I see the world with the tape measure this place has equipped me with. Therefore, my harmony and peace in my actions follows the commitment this place has shown me like a lighthouse.

As Stephan Harding mentioned when describing Arne Naess and his 'deep ecology' theory, it was not just his knowledge as a philosopher that allowed him to come up with such ideas, but

his deep love for the mountains, in particular his deep connection with Tvergastein in the Hallingskarvet mountains of central Norway. This relationship with the place has been a key influence around the 'deep ecology philosophy' of the author (Naess 1973). It is at Tvergastein, with its winds, snow and storms, and isolating views, that most of his work in deep ecology was done.

The 'Deep Ecology' movement was initiated by Arne Naess's reflections in his paper 'The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movements' (1973); inspired probably more as a social movement pretension – with political and cultural implications – than a metaphysical or academic theory in itself. What made Naess write about 'deep ecology' were his experiences in a different ecological activism or commitment. For him, the ecology under the science loupe misses, in its insistence on facts and logic, the importance of the ethical questions about how living things interact with each other and with their environment. What the 'deep ecology' concept tries to embrace is this lack of science alone, and insists in the primacy of deep experience, deep questioning and deep commitment. And this together allows for the creation of an interconnected system that he called ecosophy: 'an evolving but consistent philosophy of being, thinking and acting in the world, that embodies ecological wisdom and harmony' (Harding nd).

The conformation of an ecosophy delineates a process in which one feels completely at one with the ecosystem and its different lives and forms. As a result, it becomes obvious that the ecosystem has value in itself – thus countering the view of nature as a dead machine ready for human use and exploitation, which has permeated the modern mind and science –. This would allow us to overcome the anthropocentric and dualistic roots of our Western culture that have led us to the way today mankind relates to nature and its destructive results (White 1967).

For Naess, deep experiences in nature can give rise to deep questioning, which results in assembling a coherent framework of beliefs that makes us take decisions and actions within our lifestyles. This is what distinguishes deep ecology with 'shallow ecologies' and what makes the theory more a movement than a philosophy (Naess 2005). In order to identify a deep experience as such, it has to bring us to deeply question the fundamental assumptions of our society: the roots of the anthropocentrism in science and philosophy, the undisputed primacy of economics with its insistence on ascribing monetary value at the highest hierarchy and the wisdom of free markets, the dualistic culture of humans separated from nature, etc.

In the end, the process can engender a lifestyle of deep commitment as a result of our experiences and questionings, where the care for both human and non-human takes place, enlarging within our broader sense of an ecological self.

Returning to la Vall d'Alba, the experiences I had in this land have brought me to question why that process has occurred there, and also why it can no longer continue like that. The imbalance created and the impossibility to sustain any urban area without giving due attention to the rural ones. The situation of abandoned rural areas in Spain and other places around the globe is the other side of the coin of the unsustainable situation of the major cities.

We cannot solve the problem in one area without looking at the other. In a way, the interdependence between them is inside the wider interdependence of major scales in the Nature.

What this place encourages me to do is not to develop a new theory or philosophy, nor to create a big revolution, or become a brave activist with a worldwide calling cause. No. It is much simpler than this. This place wants me to live there, be part of the interdependence of its land and ecosphere that has been broken and diminished more and more. As Aldo Leopold writes, 'land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants, and animals. Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil' (1966: 8). The soil in the fields of la Vall d'Alba wants to feel again the tools removing its surface, so the oxygen can mix with it; the stones want to be moved and be assembled in new walls that will channel the water, bringing life to new seeds; re-build the ditches that Arabic ancestors built so the water of the rain and rivers can fertilize many lives on its way down to the sea; impregnate the air with the aromas of tasty meals and the wood burning in the fireplaces and kitchens; fill the air with the voices and laughter of kids playing, climbing trees, or running and rolling over the fields scratching their knees. The call of this place is as simple as the trees, the hillsides and the passing of the sun in its sky want to be seen, contemplated and admired.

In the same way that Aldo Leopold 'sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view', I sense the wanting of these landscapes to have a more living ecosphere, and in this way to perpetuate its richness. Thus, 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise' (Leopold 1966: 13).

Aldo Leopold wrote 'The Land Ethic' after a deep experience in the mountains of United States. The episode occurred there between him, the wolf and the mountain made him write about the urge of enlargement the boundaries of ethics 'to include soils, waters, plants and animals, or collectively: the land' as part of the same community with humankind (Leopold 1966: 2). This marked a shift in the role of human as a conqueror or exploiter of nature to be just part as one plain member more. As Leopold explains, similarly to Naess, 'we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love or otherwise have faith in' (Leopold 1966: 7). Or, what is the same, there cannot be a change in the field of ethics without a personal inner change in our beliefs or convictions.

Therefore, we see again the importance of the cycle: deep experience that creates deep question, which creates deep commitment.

La Vall d'Alba, this is the place that keeps hooking me even when I would only like to be far away from it. It is the place where one day, after I had filled my bag up to its limits, I would come back and give back all that I have taken with me from all the different places I have walked and be part of.

The commitment I have with this place is entangled with the ones that have taught me beyond words the beauty and the horrors of the impermanent nature of all phenomena, the care cycle of life, the fundamental community and social nature of the human animals, the loss of the self along the most rooted self experiences. The responsibility of being part of a whole purpose that I do not need to fully understand, this is: the belonging of Gaia vital purpose and knowing and choosing myself part of it.

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