

Title: Permission to Crumble, within the Container of Awareness

I.

“The human being knows himself only insofar as he knows the world; he perceives the world only in himself, and himself only in the world. Every new object, clearly seen, opens up a new organ of perception in us.” -

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Seventeen strangers had come together in the dead of winter to find ways to practice shifting their perception. This was part of a shared journey to better explore the many connections between Ecology and Spirituality. We began, as one would expect, through the usual means of talking, reading, lectures and writing. Yet in addition, and often experientially, we were encouraged to expand into our bodies through our sensory perception, paying attention to what we noticed in nature and, inadvertently, in ourselves. Anchoring through daily meditation, being attentive to our dreams and consciously returning to our bodies with two-minute silences interspersed throughout the day, were each part of the exploration. In the space of three calendar weeks, as I ‘arrived’ within this practice, I experienced something novel: feeling safe in the landscape I found myself in, and even in the body I found myself in, surrounded as I was by fellow seekers.

It took a few days of being in the English countryside, a landscape that was new to me, to notice that I was holding myself differently. The word ‘safe’ leapt out at me while I noticed that the normally finely drawn lines between my “in-here” and the non-human world “out-there,” (Rozak, 1992) were blurred. What had altered? Notes from my journal at the time tap into the experience: *“I am filled with wonder, in experiencing the silence almost tangible over the land, as it lies covered in frost. I watch my mind panic at how cold it is while my body stills into attention. My lungs breathe in the biting cold air. It reaches my belly, warmer than it entered. It reaches my head sooner, chilling it. It reaches my un-gloved hands, freezing them.”*

Two of the concepts that had woven themselves into my experience during this time were that of the “lifeworld” and “natural attitude” as defined by the philosophical study of phenomenology¹. On being introduced to these, I understood that I had unknowingly fallen into them, one after the other, by virtue of stepping into a new environment.

The first shift within me was a change in my lifeworld. Lifeworlds are the moment-by-moment “normally unnoticed, automatic unfolding” (Seamon, 2014) of places and situations that make up our everyday experience. The concept includes not only the experience of the individual, but that of the other-than-

¹ Heidegger defines phenomenology as an approach to understanding the nature of consciousness/reality that “let[s] that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself” (Seamon, 2014). Simply put, it invites us to be an intrinsic part of any experience, instead of reporting it as a detached observer.

human world in which they are, thus speaking to the unity of the experience of the whole as it unfolds. Lifeworlds are the routines we cultivate as humans navigating familiar landscapes and places, day after day. For instance, while at home in India, I respond to the arrival of fresh bread every morning, which is announced by the distant honking of a bicycle horn. I then collect a blue-lidded container, check for my keys and hop out the door to slowly walk up the slope, timing my journey to meet the bread-man at the top of the road. The routine is habitual, and I no longer think about it while doing it.

In the crumbling of my known lifeworld I was brought face-to-face with a “hyperseparation” that has lived awhile in me: one of the mind and body. The concept of hyperseparation was verbalised by philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood, to describe the dualities of mind/body, person/world, people/environment and nature/matter as understood in western culture. These dualities are used as structures of dominance, which value one side of the binary, and make the other side automatically inferior. In my case too, the mind was superior, and the body inferior. I also noticed that interpreting and tending to my experience as a human being often took priority over cultivating an inclusive awareness of the other-than-human world, it being an intrinsic part of my experience. I was selective in the importance I chose to give to mind and people over body and place.

The second shift—which was underpinned and facilitated by the first—was a change in my natural attitude. Natural attitude is a perspective that normally goes unrecognized as a perspective. It is simply there and viewed as fact. Phenomenologist James Cameron states that this state of ‘normal unawareness’ or *natural attitude* can be broken consciously to question experience and consciousness. Both concepts were directed specifically towards understanding the self, listening and observing the body’s sensory responses in the new geography and practicing connecting with the other-than-human-world.

By taking the time to observe the form, texture and temperature that morning, I was able to pause long enough to step out of my mind; keenly aware of the flow of breath within me, that intrinsically linked me to the land on which I stood in one fluid loop. Not looking *at* it as I normally do, with my boundaries tightly drawn, I felt suspiciously permeable. The experience left me feeling softened, alive and deliciously receptive. It was a feeling I had not experienced in India, but that came far more readily as a response to this landscape.

Facilitated by this new, unknown landscape and its ecology, my body had become a vehicle for a shift in perception and a deeper experience of self. In his book, *Spiritualise*, Dr. Jonathan Rowson recognises that the body, due to the fact that it is always present, is the means through which all experience is expressed (Rowson, 2014). Twentieth century philosopher Edmund Husserl was one of the first in the western world to recognise that all human experience happens through the body. And indeed, spiritual practices—designed to connect ones inner and outer realities—are often begun with the practice of connecting the wandering mind through the breath to one’s body. Perceptual psychologist Laura Sewall points out that “our sensory capacities—taste, smell, sight, hearing, and

touch—are the fundamental avenues of connection between self and world” (Sewall, 1999).

II.

“As the visible world becomes meaningful and vital, we feel it in our bodies. The sensory world thus becomes directly embodied in us; the relationship is visceral, and subjective experience becomes sensuality. We fall in love.”- Laura Sewall

It was a rare sunny day. Walking by the river in full stride, sometimes slipping or squelching along on a well-churned path had emptied me. I lifted my face into the weak warmth and bright sunlight allowing myself to soak it all in. A log lay invitingly by and I watched a seagull not so lazily circle the patch of sky above me, through a lattice of branches. The ground beneath my boots was spongy from a thick carpet of browning leaves, its softness reflected inside.

–Notes from the journal

Graham Harvey astutely recognised that “the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others” (Rose, 2013). My sensual recognition in that moment of being in the cold, English landscape and repeatedly on the many walks I took, was two-fold in that it pointed to a “personhood beyond humans” and a “centrality of relationships”. The person/world hyperseparation within dissolved briefly but intimately, perhaps because I was practicing being attentive visually, and was then expansively aware of being in my body in the landscape.

Sewall speaks of the transformative and bridging role of attention in her article *The Skill of Ecological Perception*, where she talks about “learning to attend.” The act of paying attention, she says, resembles falling in love. When we fall in love, there is a natural opening up of our perceptual field and sense of connectedness, which leads us to embrace of our surroundings in a ways that are more conscious (Sewall, 1995).

Refining and deepening both our aesthetic and sensory perception can reawaken our numbed senses, which might just be one of the ways of preserving the Earth. Sewall, describes a person practicing this kind of radical love, through the development of their attention, as a visionary. They are in the act of “cultivating the power to translate between the seen and unseen realms with attention and imagination” (Sewall, 1999).

Failing to pay attention in this way means we limit our field of perception, shutting down to a large extent the connections that, whether we know it or not, are vital to our well being. In other words, we become numb. This note also from the journal reminds me experientially of ‘coming back to me’ –

Over and over again, I take solace from tracing the planes, ridges and furrows, the nook and dips of towering bare Oaks. Tracing them with my eyes and breath, bring me back to life.

–Notes from the journal

Paying attention is hard, and often painful, work. Yet it is the only way in which we can reach past the many hyperseparations we live in, to connect with that which we have 'other-ed'.

III.

“The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct.” – David Abram

Breaking open, or crumbling, sensorily through the process of paying clear, careful and loving attention means opening up to everything - without exception. This includes the shock, outrage and pain we will feel as we begin to honour the web of connection that binds us to each other and the world that we live in. When the shell cracks; some of us will delve into the shadow-side of despair and hopelessness that goes hand-in hand with the experience of being embodied and alive to the present. This was my experience, as I stood in the landscape, and felt into my thawing body. How did I arrive at such a separated way of perceiving myself, and how did we arrive at such a dualistic way of perceiving the world?

One of the key, recent influences on our relationship to self and the natural world has been Cartesian philosophy, which views the universe as a machine separate from the souls of humans; it sees matter as separate from spirit. The mind (or spirit) is assigned to humans alone, while the rest of the 'living and non-living' world is thought of as mindless matter. Descartes' mechanistic view of the world also saw us as dominant over all other life. "We could make ourselves the masters and possessors of nature," he says (*Robbins*, p.115). What we have created for ourselves reflects our current dualistic and deeply damaging attitude. Having created a technologically sophisticated world, we are efficiently destroying our planet and ourselves as a species with breathtaking swiftness.

Shifting out of this worldview, we have the opportunity to perceive differently. We begin to understand that we live in a world filled with intelligent, sentient life, all of whose forms are capable of "learning, reasoning and understanding" (*Rose, 2013*). We begin to see, indeed, that our personal transformations mirror and are entwined with the transformation of the world. As we marvel at the wonder, we simultaneously begin feeling the destruction we are living and continue to weave for ourselves in our compartmentalised realities.

My "sensuous- intuitive" (*Bortoft, 2012*) experience of these seemingly separate strands turned into conscious understanding as I began the work of revealing myself to me. With that almost accidental first shift in perception, came strings of insights about the world in which I lived as a felt experience in my body. What then do we choose to do with this feeling of revelation and connection? Any action that springs from this ever-deepening practice of attention that connects is what we aim to act upon. As Mary Oliver says, "There is only one question, how to love this world."

IV.

**Filament upon fiber the web is built
Seemingly stray strands pooling
A network of tails to connect and intuit with
A gathering of humans,
To support and commit to
A lone path we wander
Held in the belly of a generous universe.**

**The river that flows connects us
From the land of the Ancients,
To the clouds in now-time
Opening to wonder a choice within every pore.**

–Notes from the journal

At this time in human evolution the mind vs matter and people vs world dualities need to be urgently and creatively challenged within a container of compassion and attention. We need to give ourselves the permission to crumble, so that we may transform. In the book “The Magdalen, Tom Kenyon and Judi Sion go as far as to say that, “true transformation does not require hope and moves even in despair” (*Kenyon and Sion, 2015*). Only when we allow ourselves the opportunity to create a safe container of attention, or awareness, within which to fall apart, will the rigid separations between the mind and body, the person and world, begin to shudder and collapse. To feel the fear that will undoubtedly arise that will make us want to run, to hide, to distract ourselves by any means available to us, to keep the illusion that “all is well” at bay for just a little while longer, is an essential part of this process.

Allowing the experience of encountering through my ‘intuitive’ sense presented to me what I had suspected before but never had to confront quite so clearly: the ‘me’ that dropped into relating to all that I had chosen to ‘see’. A feeling of connection and regard towards everything not just the limited sphere of my mental perception emerged. Connecting the body, heart and mind in this way, through the loving container of attention, begins to carve space for what wants to be birthed. The new that lies within the ashes will then be given a chance to sprout. In the words of Joanna Macy, “....*facing our fears, and letting go and getting on with our knee jerk reactions to what we think we don’t like, or are afraid of...To give ourselves a taste of what that passion is. To let us fall really in love with our planet, and its beauty, and to see that in ourselves, as well as in each other.*”

Viewing the challenges we face today as a call to Presence rather than a failure might be the key to not succumbing to helplessness in the face of the task we need to take on; to begin the process of learning to create from that expanded place of consciousness, if we are to begin feeling the new structures that want to be birthed, even as the old structures collapse around us.

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