

Reflective Journal: *Becoming of age: an evolving matter*

Introduction

Residential Module 6 of the MA Ecology and Spirituality is entitled: Evolution and Spirituality in the West; but for those participating it became something much more like an enquiry into – what is life?

Where to begin?

This reflection is articulated around my own evolving impression of being alive in today's world. Considering the multiple layers of information discussed during the module around different theories of evolution, this was the occasion to also review some of the personal conclusions I had drawn since the beginning of the MA programme.

It is evident to me today that we human beings are not mechanical devices whose genetic make-up has been programmed and may be defined solely by scientifically reasoned "laws", nor indeed are other species. Darwin's remarkable work reveals that while he shared an objective scientific recording of his theory of the *Origin of Species*, he was also particularly sensitive to spiritual dimensions of life and the belief in a creative force, which he referred to as "the Creator". That, through his discoveries, he had to deny the biblical story that God created Earth and all the creatures therein was clearly a tough call, but also seems illustrative of later strands of thinking that led to process philosophy and other dynamic approaches to explaining what life is about, to which I shall return later.

Nor are we a super-species, superior to others with the right to command dominion over planet Earth. Humans are indeed "blessed" with - or at least the capacity for - forms of intelligence not common to other species (and vice-versa) and the ability to arise on two legs, which accords a certain freedom of movement that is distinct from most other animate beings. However, it is surely timely to discard once and for all the delusion that we can or should isolate, elevate or protect ourselves from the rest of life through progress, scientific and technological advances? I can certainly appreciate the impressive intellectual prowess and argumentative logic of some philosophers like Daniel Dennett who argues –

convincingly for many – that life is primarily robotic and that “this idea of immaterial souls capable of defying the laws of physics has outlived its for survival its credulity thanks to the advances of the natural sciences.” (Dennett, 2004 pp. 1-3).

What is missing for me, however – as for many other contemporary philosophers, such as David Abram and Andreas Weber - is the aliveness of the experience of life, as a dance of mutual recognition, of interdependence inviting collaboration and cooperation at multiple levels, and the mystery that engages my curiosity in a way that no intellectual, rationally logical argument like Dennett’s can do.

Becoming and belonging

“Why is there something rather than nothing?” asks David Abram in *Becoming Animal*. “It is enough to notice the inherent dynamism of the present moment – to notice that mere existence is already an uprising, and not a blank and passive floating.” (Abram, 2010 p.49)

This module has indeed occasioned an uprising of my original, intuitive sense of *belonging* to a dynamic, enlivening, evolving story that continues to reveal new layers of consciousness about a universe that is constantly *becoming*...

Author Stephen Jenkinson speaks of the notion of belonging in *Come of Age: A Case for Elderhood in a Time of Trouble*: “We have this word, *belong*. We use it to mean “being a part of.” But the old English prefix *be-* has the semantic consequence of intensifying as it goes. So *belonging* means something closer to “the deepening of longing.” That’s how you belong – not by finally arriving, but by having the longing for arrival quickened, by being willing to long after life by living.” (Jenkinson, 2018, p. 364)

So alongside an exploration of various evolutionary perceptions of “humans being”, I shall also reflect on my own sense of belonging, becoming older and discovering how to embody the roles and responsibilities of eldership.

Historian Mary Evelyn Tucker co-created with evolutionary philosopher Brian Swimme the *Journey of the Universe* project that offers a film, a book and conversations about the story of life (Swimme & Tucker, 2011). She observes that understanding and debate about Darwin’s theory of evolution spans just over 150 years, with current Western worldviews still largely rooted in a belief in human progress founded on anthropocentric scientific explanations or religious positions. In a later work, *Ecology and Religion*, co-authored with John Grim, Tucker observes that “although Darwinism resituated anthropocentrism in an evolutionary worldview, an abiding tension surfaced in some forms of Christianity that emphasized the uniqueness of God’s creation and stressed revelation as residing in biblical scriptures, not in nature.” (Grim and Tucker, 2014 p. 57)

This sounds remarkably similar to the mediaeval religious scholasticism that the Neo-Platonist thinkers of the Renaissance felt impelled and inspired to break free from, opening the way to a vibrant new spirituality. Yet this in turn became sidelined in Western thinking as the Reformation refocused the quest for meaning around the tensions between Protestant and Catholic forms of belief about the origins of life, and in a similar way, such swings of the pendulum between religious and spiritual ways of thinking are paralleled in scientific and philosophical arguments about evolution. So, after my own painful experiences of living alongside some of the violent consequences of religious tensions in Northern Ireland in 1968 and in a segregated school system in the West of Scotland in the 60s and 70s, instead of attempting to compare one theory with another to seek some common ground, I have welcomed the chance to consider new forms of thinking that have underpinned the development of process philosophy.

Dynamic duration

Mary Evelyn Tucker affirms that the universe “is best understood not as discrete incidents of evolution, but as a whole unfolding dynamic and developmental process.” (Tucker, 2011). And this finds an echo in the work of Henry Bergson, who, a century earlier, offered an alternative explanation for Darwin’s mechanisms of evolution, suggesting instead that evolution is motivated by an *élan vital* - humanity’s natural creative impulse that is constantly developing and generating new forms of life. For Bergson, while he accepted evolution as a scientifically established fact, he considered that purely logical thought could not explain the meaning of life; what was missing was the notion of “duration.” By this he did not mean a linear sense of time progressing, but rather an accumulation of embodied experience by an individual “nested” or embedded in the world in deep interconnection. (1911 p. 7) As Andreas Weber puts it: “Everything that is of this world longs for more contact in order to be more strongly and intimately in relationship and thereby to come more fully into its own.” (Weber, 2017 p. 24).

Bergson called for the philosopher to “go further than the scientist” and to enable humankind to connect “human consciousness with the living principle whence it emanates...” and to engage in “the study of becoming in general... through evolutionism and consequently the true continuation of science” He concludes with the proviso that this science should be “a set of truths either experienced or demonstrated” and not a new kind of scholasticism. (Bergson, op.cit. p. 204)

Neuropsychologist and author Iain McGilchrist highlights similar observations by German philosopher Martin Heidegger in the latter’s work *Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)* around the notion of time and human consciousness. According to Heidegger, McGilchrist says, “our apprehension of whatever is takes part in the process of that thing becoming what it is”. And he explains further: “Heidegger insists that we do not live *in* time, as if it were some

independent, abstract flow, alien to our being, but live time – much as being-in-the-world is not the same as being in the world like a marble in a box. We live time rather than just conceive it, and similarly we live the body rather than simply derive sensory information through it. Through the experience of time, *Dasein* ('to be there' in the world) becomes a 'being towards death': without death existence would be care-less, would lack the power that draws us to one another and to the world." (McGilchrist, 20p. 150-153)

So it seems that a search for the sense of life – like in many indigenous traditions – requires paying due attention to the meaning of death. This is becoming more and more present in my own experience as I allow the emergence of moments of spontaneous awareness of the many aspects of *gravity*, and how this, as yet scientifically unexplained, mysterious force holds me close to planet Earth and will draw me ever deeper in as my material body declines and degenerates to finally decompose and become at one again – dust to dust and ashes to ashes.

Also pertinent to ongoing reflections on time, duration and meaningful living as an elder, Stephen Jenkinson suggests that "by doing the work of deepening by diminishment, you are lending younger people endurance in times of trouble." He claims that this function results from respecting another time-related notion: "One's elders are one's past, but not the kind of past that means 'gone' or 'behind you'. You look towards your past and there they are, *before you*." (Jenkinson, op.cit. p. 62)

In the final days of the module, I spent a solo day out on the Dartington Estate, close to the river Dart where I did a small ritual offering of gifts gathered in nature several months previously that I had held and cherished to honour the presence of the women of my lineage. It felt exactly right to be in the river with them, and the following words by Stephen Jenkinson, that I read only some weeks later, were particularly pertinent: "You are not standing still on the shore of life watching the river of time bear them away. You are in the river, too." (Jenkinson, op.cit. p. 62)

Becoming of age

My own sense of being in the river of my enquiry about life is summed up in the following lines:

*Growing older, feeling bolder
No longer need to cry on a shoulder
For life seems clearer
Simpler and dearer*

*With heart gently open
After so long feeling broken
My purpose is softer
My intention vaguer*

*No need for definition
No rushing off on a mission
To save or to fix it...
A life being complicit*

*In illusions of grandeur
Of needs for some stature
What was I thinking
Without even blinking?*

*So I stand in my lineage, advancing in age
Recalling the moments when life was a gauge
Of failure or success
And deadlines for press*

*When busyness and anxiety commanded so much space
Today simple solitude means moments of grace
To reflect, in connivance with spirits unseen
Content in the knowledge that I can still dream*

*When I seek realignment, let my lineage unfold
A timeflow of ancestors, with tales of old,
Whisper me messages profound and sage
Or laugh at my gravity: "that's not a rule of age!"*

*Like a toddler entering childhood
I open my eyes and wonder
What mischief might an elder
Infuse into growing older?*

*What qualities of fresh life
Can I bring alive each day?
To remind my younger fellows
That we are here to play*

*The symphony of life, with all its highs and lows
Andante or allegro, it's up to us to show
The fulcrum of our life is to play with what we're given
To create a glorious sound together, it's not a race to heaven...*

*So I listen to the sounds, as all these senses blend
And feel a gentler rhythm, as life gathers towards an end
That's just a new beginning, I sense as I let go
Of hopes, desires and wanting, to be at one with the flow.*

Devon, Summer 2018

An evolving matter

The days spent exploring the story of the universe from the perspective of process philosophers, notably the work of Friedrich von Schelling and Alfred North Whitehead, remain a rather dense and intuitive memory. Thanks to the enlightening interpretation by course leader and philosopher Matthew Segal of what for me was like a new language at times, I have boundless notes and thoughts that will most likely only start to become clearer over time. This feels like a work in progress as I continue to read and observe how Whitehead's ideas on the importance of movement, flow, connection, "actual occasions" and "conscrescence" manifest in my own life. Segal comments that Whitehead's process of concrescence, as described in *Process and Reality*, represents "the primary miracle of creation, whereby the dry bones of the past are clothed again in the flesh of renewed purpose and zest for life. It is the miracle whereby actual occasions perpetually perish 'and yet life for evermore'." (Segal, 2017 p.12) Encouragement indeed to explore the evolving matter of elderhood!

The final days of the module offered the chance to explore the ideas of paleontologist and Jesuit priest, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, on the evolution of humanity towards, what he terms, the "Omega" point: "the principle we needed to explain both the persistent march of things toward greater consciousness and the paradoxical solidity of what is most fragile". (Teilhard de Chardin, 1955 p. 271)

Teilhard posits that: "the evolution of life ... is an anti-entropic process, running counter to the second law of thermodynamics with its degradation of energy and its tendency to uniformity. With the aid of the sun's energy, biological evolution marches uphill, producing increased variety and higher degrees of organization." (Teilard de Chardin, op.cit, p. 27). While this too echoes a sense of "becoming", so far, it has nevertheless left me uneasy with the notion of an end goal, the Omega point, and the idea of "ultra-hominisation".

The analysis, lectures and writing about his work by historian Ursula King, notably in a lecture on "Ecological and Mystical Spirituality from an Interfaith Perspective" (King, 2002 pp 5-6), appear helpful as a potential entry point for further study and reflection. However, although I feel drawn to further explore the ideas of this remarkable man whom King refers to as a creative visionary, and perhaps disentangle them from the religious connotations of Catholic theology, I have been more attracted to the work of Bergson and Whitehead.

Conclusion

The inspirational qualities of Henry Corbin's work and its influences on Jung, Hillman and the realm of deep psychology also frequently come to mind as I wrestle with the challenges of grasping Whitehead and Bergson's ideas. Yet despite the density of the latter, it seems to

me that these thinkers all convey a felt experience and embodied connection to life. So at the end of the module, the main *élan* I feel towards further investigating the sense of evolution for my own life enquiry must remain with Whitehead.

"You think the world is what it looks like in fine weather at noon day; I think it is what it seems like in the early morning when one first wakes from deep sleep." (A.N. Whitehead)

This quotation of Whitehead's comments to his mentee and collaborator Bertrand Russell resonates deeply with me. It denotes the difference between the beauty of life in full sunshine at midday, or even at sunset in the evening, and the freshness and promise of the first rays of daylight when life is beginning anew. It brings a sense of confidence that another day, another cycle of life has begun and that I am in it, with a renewed presence to life, and the awareness that there are always new opportunities to extend my embodied experience further through new encounters: occasions for becoming, the same but different. And there is no need to hold onto the past, to capture the present or to plan the future.

If I can just be present to what is, without needing to "rise to the occasion", these occasions will arise in a flow of potential becomings. Today, this seems like a good starting point to explore more of life, as an elder, becoming of age.

Reference list

Abram, David (2010) *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology*. Edition 2011. New York and Toronto: Vintage Books

Bergson, Henry (1911) *Creative Evolution* tr. Arthur Mitchell, New York: Henry Holt and Company

Dennett, Daniel (2004) *Freedom Evolves*. London: Penguin Books

Jenkinson, Stephen (2018) *Come of Age: The Case for Elderhood in a Time of Trouble*. Berkley, California: North Atlantic Books

King, Ursula (2002) *Ecological and Mystical Spirituality from an Interfaith Perspective* (2002 Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture)

McGilchrist, Iain (2009) *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*. Edition 2012. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Segal, Matthew (2017) *The Place of Life in the Cosmos: Feeling the Origin of Organism* (2017 International Whitehead Conference)

Swimme, Brian Thomas and Tucker, Mary Evelyn (2011) *Journey of the Universe*. (Last updated 2018). Available at: <http://www.journeyoftheuniverse.org> (Accessed 27 August 2018)

Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre (1955) *The Phenomenon of Man*. Edition 2008. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought

Weber, Andreas (2017) *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing