

Reflective Journal: Why on Earth am I here?

Module 1 Ecology and Spirituality

Introduction

A new chapter begins, a new phase in life, post-retirement, as a student with the chance to revisit my beliefs, my passions, my disappointments and all the experiences that have brought me to be alive today, at the start of January 2018. So who am I? And why on Earth am I here?

I find myself on a planet that offers such an awesomely beautiful natural environment, which delights and inspires me; yet I suffer deeply in a society that seems to be hastening the demise of all life. I yearn to comprehend why we continue to perpetuate an anthropocentric worldview that we (humans) are “in control”; that we are continuously progressing towards a “better world” in an insane belief that we can make use of whatever/whoever we choose; and that with our clever minds, we can devise new technological fixes to contain the problems, continue to expect exponential economic growth and carry on regardless...

“What on Earth is wrong with us?” asked eco-psychologist Chellis Glendenning in *My Name Is Chellis & I’m in recovery from Western Civilization*. As she observed: “People have a natural state of being ... our primal matrix: the state of a healthy, wholly functioning psyche in full bodied participation with a healthy, wholly functioning Earth ... the *animus mundi* which resides both within us and all around us.”

I’ve always felt a deep spiritual connection to “Life”, whether through religious practices or simply a sense of self-in-connectedness with something bigger. But having eschewed organized forms of religion for many years, the most meaningful moments that I can describe as “spiritual” have been out in nature, where deep reverence and sometimes creative inspiration emerge spontaneously.

Western society's brand of so-called "civilized" thinking - racing to possess, consume, manipulate, suppress or compete for more and more dominion over Life on Earth in all of its forms - human and other-than-human - seems to be oblivious to any values that might echo the models that nature can offer us.

And until recently, the notions of scientific interpretation of life that I gleaned briefly in secondary school put me off any further exploration of "science". It seemed to me that "science" demanded of me to think in boxes, equations, dry facts, measured figures and controlled experiments - reduced to the n-th degree, in clinical laboratory-like environments.

Where was the story of life in all this? I knew that for some, science was a serious path of exploration of the world and beyond, but I just couldn't "get it" until I attended a course led by educator and writer Margaret Wheatley on "Leadership in times of Chaos" in 2010. Since then, my relationship with science has come alive, dissolving my old antipathy towards any learning couched in scientific terminology; and my sense of engaged spirituality has found new meaning as I continue to work with Meg Wheatley on her training for *Warriors for the Human Spirit*.

Today, my aspiration is to continue to explore what it means to be fully alive and of service to life-at-large (Life), in an ecological spirit that does not add further aggression, pain or damage, but rather seeks to revive, regenerate and revere Life... so that all may thrive.

One big question for me is how I can actually articulate this in today's world; how to invite others to explore the new-old stories that seem to be just waiting under the surface to be heard and retold? Hence my motivation to join the MA Ecology and Spirituality programme.

Methodology

This essay is framed around initial observations, experiences and reflections during the introductory module *Ecology and Spirituality*. It comprises a phenomenological account of my experiential journey, including some personal poems, and commentary drawn from academic references that struck me as particularly illustrative of this learning process.

Shifting perspectives

In the first few days, I sense a need for transition from anxiety to trust; from anx-i-ous to consc-i-ous. I become aware of the need to enlarge my thinking about human beings to reflect rather on "humans being" - together with other forms of life...

So when asked in class to just start writing some reflections, to let the words emerge in the moment, after some initial anxiety and awkwardness, I let go of my hesitation and let the words simply come...

Write ... write it right? What is right? How can I be right? – right being, right attitude, right action?

Ah yes – the old sense that I must do something according to rules, in a logical, time-contained, structured manner. Such tension. In fact I love to write, to allow my experience to emerge in word-form. But to feel it is right writing, I need to embrace the space of not knowing, let my breath come and go, enter connection of body, mind and spirit and allow myself to dissolve into being:

*I'm here to be, to deepen who's me
Alive and tender, curious and free*

*To venture beyond the trials I see
And weep over, heavy hearted, bent of knee*

*Yet one ray of sunlight, a callbird up high
In trees cycling life, just listening to their sigh...*

*Revives life within me and enjoins me to share
In company of all, in Oneness, I'm here.*

(6 January 2018)

And then I started to sense what the doing might be: entering a portal to new ways of understanding my true relationship with Life and why on Earth I am here.

Transformational learning

The container proposed in this MA programme at Schumacher College suits me well, with its stimulating balance of academic rigor and relational experiential sessions often out in nature. It offers so many opportunities for truly transformational learning, including the emergence of poetic writing that is taking me beyond any previous formal learning processes.

Curiosity

Curiosity, I reflect, is a curious state of being. It stirs something up. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as “a strong desire to know or learn something” or “an unusual or interesting object or fact”. Rather than killing me, like the proverbial cat, curiosity has

brought me to learn more about how science might help me better comprehend and articulate my intuitive and spiritual sense of “what we are all about”.

So I welcomed being introduced to the work of biologist and philosopher Ernest Haeckel, who coined the term “ecology”. His observations of “art forms in nature” (*Kunstformen der Natur*) such as the siphonophores or the sea anemones, and his exploration of the “world riddle” with the image of human beings and the universe being part of one system (“monism”) stirred my imagination. They reminded me of the great relief of simply being attentive to what is, rather than the exhausting effort of being constantly distracted by technological tools, designed to “make life better”. Rather than keeping scientific exploration separate, Haeckel’s proposal to study living organisms in their environment made much greater sense to me and felt like a breath of fresh air.

The mortal danger of stagnation

Curiosity prevents me from stagnating. I recalled this as I read a recommended article in class about Goethean nature perception by William Duncan: *Dilation and Beauty: Toward a Goethean Way of Perception* (p. 33), and how humans tend to be “creatures of habit”, often drawn towards something known, which seems safe. However, as Duncan points out: “Our method of perception is not safe from our tendency towards habituation. Habituation inevitably leads to stagnation.”

He goes on to describe the limiting effects of this on human neural pathways, thus restricting our capacity for perception beyond old familiar ways. According to Duncan, Goethe’s openness to perceiving nature in a phenomenological manner was because “he could relax into the anxiety of not knowing, and not let his anxiety dictate his perceptions.”

Listening to the silences

During an appreciative enquiry pairwork exercise on considering humans as beings connecting nature and spirit, I found myself listening, not just to the words of another, but also to the silences between the words, to hear a deeper story.

Listening deeply was to become a key quality of this new learning experience, a core tool and indeed a portal into new ways of apprehending, analysing and appreciating, that are very different from the traditional academic learning and observation modes that I have experienced. This is well described by Thomas Fleischner in *The Mindfulness of Natural History* as “... a practice of intentional, focused attentiveness and receptivity to the more-than-human world, guided by honesty and accuracy.” And when such attention is absent, he notes that it “correlates with a plethora of social, cultural and environmental maladies: widespread depression, violence, and pollution.” It is surely time to unplug the wires of

“streamed” information and settle down to listen through silence to the stories of the babbling brook.

Creative disruption and discomfort

Another portal to new ways of apprehending my relationship with Life opened in these early days as I reflected on observations in an article *Radical openness and contextualization* by our teacher, Eve Anneke, about the importance of accepting to sit with discomfort and disruption as part of the learning process.

My awareness of how ingrained and pervasive old attitudes and belief systems can be had been shaken up during a class discussion about what Kenyan environmental activist Wangarai Maathai was not saying in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech... As a former diplomat, I found myself feeling awkward and making excuses, recalling that when I used to draft statements for high-level colleagues, they had to be “politically correct” and avoid offending any other party: that was what diplomacy was about, I believed, and change had to be negotiated behind the scenes in order to avoid diplomatic incidents. Yet I always felt there must somehow be better ways of articulating deep injustice, oppression, genocide, ecocide ...

Possibly the greatest discomfort for me in these early days, however, has been the realization of the extent of the influence of the notions of “separation” and dualism, e.g. as manifested through worldviews based on anthropocentrism, reductionism, colonialism, racism, sexism, etc. Reading the work of Australian philosopher Val Plumwood and other ecofeminist writers has helped open my awareness of the deeply ingrained “master/subordinate” mindset that has guided so much of my own perception of life.

Underlying it all I can begin to recognize, in much of the behaviour that has “mis-shaped” Western society, the deep human anxiety about death, as well as the tendency to cling to habits that are familiar and comfortable. Nevertheless, as Anneke observes (op.cit):

“... the closing off too early of discomfort and disruption is counter-productive, removing from (the) students the very practice that appears to be useful in navigating uncertainty – i.e. building a stomach for disequilibrium, living with vertigo and immersing oneself deeply in paradoxes.”

Daring to go to the edge

As I learn to sit with the paradoxes, in varying states of discomfort, and “edginess” I find myself even more curious and willing to use my imagination, my intuition and other new forms of perception to explore the themes of Ecology and Spirituality beyond the certainty of academic enquiry.

In her article “Reversing the world”, ecopsychologist Laura Sewall quotes Jungian psychologist James Hillman: “In the beginning is the image, first imagination then perception.”

Sewall then goes on to explain why accepting to sit in liminal spaces is so important for expanding the realm of phenomenological exploration: “A finely tuned imagination is informed by the physical world, drawing from the past and present, and from the edges of our awareness ... The edge is where our known experience becomes flavoured with the unknown, where imagination steps forward into the realm of possibility.”

Conclusion

This initial foray into the depths of some of my core life questions from an ecological and spiritual perspective has certainly shaken up my thinking! As a former humanitarian worker, I struggled under the illusion that if we all made a little more effort to understand people’s suffering, or the critical environmental damage to our planet, we could make a difference and do our bit to “save the world” ... However today, to quote Margaret Wheatley’s comments in *The Unplanned Organization: Learning from Nature’s Emergent Properties*: “There’s nothing out there to save. There is a lot to be engaged with... The most we can do, when we are trying to serve is to contribute a little twitch, be a little disturbance.”

So, instead of trying to think up new solutions, I am ready to experiment more with letting go of control, letting myself simply remember to be, and letting come the inspirations that learning in relationship with nature and “others” offer. Perhaps some of these will be “little disturbances” that may even become “strange attractors” for other earnest explorers of the chaos of life, as described by Frijhof Capra in his explanations of chaos theory in *The Web of Life*.

Returning to that earlier question “what on Earth is wrong with us?”, I recall other words by Capra that sum up pretty well my perception today of the impact of the deeply rooted belief patterns of Western society and beyond that we are “separate”:

“The power of abstract thinking has led us to treat the natural environment – the web of life – as if it consisted of separate parts, to be exploited by different interest groups. Moreover, we have extended this fragmented view to our human society, dividing it into different nations, races, religious and political groups. The belief that all these fragments – in ourselves, in our environment, and in our society – are really separate has alienated us from nature and from our fellow human beings, and thus has diminished us. To regain our full humanity, we have to regain our experience of connectedness with the entire web of

life. This reconnecting, *religio* in Latin, is the very essence of the spiritual grounding of deep ecology.”

Finally, inspired by this reminder, I go outside to the gardens to reconnect with “the web of life”, and harvest some more reflections on: Why on Earth am I here?

A conduit of grace

*I came to learn, to listen, to see,
And here I've simply remembered to be... But how shall I be?
What means this for me, in relation to Thee?
As I hover on edges to draw myself free...*

*From the boxes and fences of life's ceaseless search,
To open my heart and honour my Earth
To bring forth this longing and be again One
With every part of Nature, seeing through what's humdrum*

*Not judging, but discerning, deep down in my Soul
It's only emerging as I recover what's whole
And listen, to the spaces, silences between the words
That whisper Your meaning in ways I'd not heard.*

*So how shall I be, both humble and strong?
Entice me Great Spirit, breathe through me, as I long...
To be touched, to be smitten, so I no longer need to
Hold fast to conventions that dictate this is so...*

*When all I now see sets some queer senses free
Not with eyes, ears or nose, but just deep within me,
Speaks of listening anew to the stirrings of a few
Who no longer accept to be part of the same old crew.*

*We think we're a minority, yet our community grows
As we honour our co-beings, a new picture shows
Might the sense of our connection, our purpose in this space
Be simply nothing more than a conduit of grace?*

*No hopes or expectations are needed at this time
We only have to listen and serve a cause sublime
In everyday simplicity, attentive and aware,
We learn that Life is calling, that we are here to share.*

I feel it in your spirit, graceful crocus, poking through

The damp, proud Earth that holds us, and supports us to be true.

*And as I now remember how I simply yearn to be
Alive, reverent and open, a new sense of being free...*

*I call upon my fellows for help to find my place
As a strong and humble being, a true conduit of grace.*

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