Embodied Ecology

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Over 25 years ago I gave a talk that was to change my life. I'd been asked to talk about Paganism and the environment at an academic conference and there was something powerful that wanted to be said. I wrote about the rather mysterious way that we can know something in our bodies, and how that knowing is somehow sacred:

> "Besides the cerebral knowledge we all possess, the words & ideas stored in our heads, there is a deeper knowledge held within the tissue of our bodies. It is a somatic, physical knowing which comes from direct experience. This is the knowledge of faith, of emotion, of the gut feeling".

The talk was subsequently published as *Sacred Ecology* and it's still the most popular article I've ever written. The day I gave that presentation I realised that this wasn't just an odd personal experience or an eccentric idea: this powerful way of knowing could actually be more important than the more familiar kind we talk about so much: *It's not what you know, it's the way that you know it.*

A quarter of a century later I was on a Zoom call with Ilarion Merculieff, a tribal leader raised on an island in the middle of the Bering Sea. He spoke of the wisdom that indigenous peoples wanted to offer the West. The indigenous way is to live at an Earth based pace, he said, and to listen to your heart. I understood in a profound way exactly what he meant: he was talking about the embodied ways of knowing I'd spoken about years before. My own heart filled to overflowing and I felt our kinship across the thousands of miles that separated us.

The heartful way of knowing which Ilarion spoke of is what I call the wisdom of the body and it reveals to us at an experiential level that all things are ultimately one. This is in contrast to our everyday sense of who we are, which Zen

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Piles Copse, Dartmoor

Buddhists sometimes call the 'small self'. We typically think of ourselves as "an individual separate from everything and everyone" (Eckhardt). We imagine we're somehow closed off from the world around us, but whether we take a scientific or a spiritual perspective, that's an illusion. For Thich Nhat Hanh the whole purpose of our existence is "to awaken from our illusion of separateness". Gregory Bateson, a polymath best known for his work in anthropology, concluded that "there is a larger mind of which the individual mind is only a subsystem". More recent work in cognitive neuroscience comes to a similar conclusion; you and your surrounding environment "enfold into each other and unfold from one another in the fundamental circularity that is life itself" (Varela et al). Descartes had it all wrong: we are not isolated minds incarcerated in skin bag bodies. We are, in fact embodied beings embraced in the flow of existence. As the philosopher of consciousness Christian de Quincey writes, "we are constituted by webs of interconnection. Relationship comes first, and we emerge as more or less distinct centres within the vast and complex networks that surround us".

The way spiritual wisdom is echoed by cutting edge science reminds me of the Eagle and Condor prophecy of the Amazon. The prophesy tells of a time long ago when the people of the Eagle took the masculine path of linear thinking which is expressed so powerfully in Western industrialised society. The people of the Condor took the feminine path of intuition which is still alive in indigenous cultures. According to the prophesy a time will come when the Eagle and Condor can learn to fly together. *That time is now*. As we can see from the previous paragraph, scientific ways of understanding the world need not be opposed to spiritual approaches.

While the trivia of modern life tends to encourage the illusion of separateness, we all have moments when the small, closed self opens to a wider vision. Sometimes, in an awestruck glimpse of truth, our eyes are opened. There are two fundamental aspects to this feeling of awe: there's a sense of vastness that is beyond our normal experience and a need to somehow make sense of our experience. The feeling of awe lifts us out of our mundane lives revealing our relationship to something much bigger than our everyday selves. Unsurprisingly, the feeling of awe encourages more altruistic behaviour and enhances our sense of Nature connectedness. Nature is very good at inspiring awe. Carl Sagan's TV series *Cosmos* revealed the awesomeness of space and highlighted the "small blue dot" on the edge of our galaxy that is our Earth. But although the wonders of space are awe inspiring, so too are the tiny wonders all round us. As Sagan recognised, "Nature's a lot better at inventing wonders than we are"! I recently took the time to look closely at a fly. A common house fly isn't something you'd obviously expect to be awesome, but the extraordinary complexity of each compound eye and the intricate delicacy of its wings is truly extraordinary.

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Exquisite beauty is all around

Mindfulness practice is a valuable ally in finding awe. It focuses our attention on the present moment without making any judgements about it. Being completely present to your sensory experience of something as apparently ordinary as a house fly can be truly awe-inspiring. As William Blake wisely wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as is, infinite". I think of mindfulness as a pathway to deeper connection. There are other pathways – dance and ritual for example – and they all open our awareness to the reality of our interconnectedness.

This article has explored what we might usefully call 'embodied ecology'. The principle is that the heartful, physical, embodied knowing I've been talking about allows us to appreciate our connection with what is other than ourselves. Science and spirituality agree that we are not the isolated egos that we think we are and that's obvious when we touch into embodied ways of knowing. Liberated from the illusion of separateness, we reach a "deep knowing of the sacredness of the Earth that is more than just an intellectual awareness of the facts & figures about species decimation & habitat loss. It is a feeling of unity with the Earth that we have in our gut" *(Sacred Ecology)*. That knowing, that wisdom of the body, reveals a space where science and spirit, the Eagle and the Condor, can come together once again.

Further reading:

Harris, A., 1996. 'Sacred Ecology', in Harvey and Hardman (eds), 1996.
Online: https://www.thegreenfuse.org/harris/sacredeco.htm

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