

Term Paper - Spring 2005  
ENV 520e – Deep Ecology in Context  
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SENSING AND REINHABITING OUR LANDSCAPE

**Introduction**

Over the years since moving onto the land where I now live, I have spent much time just sitting and watching. Observing the changing seasons, the cycle of the migratory birds. Listening to times of intense silence when nothing appeared to be moving, and to the roar of storms that fly off the mountains, shaking the house. Walking round the land and sensing the peaceful energy under a tree, or the stillness of a quiet corner.

I have felt more intimately connected with this land over the ten years owning it, an experience which at times has verged on the spiritual. However, I have wanted to find a framework in which to place these experiences. A framework to explain what I feel, if such exists. Deep ecology and ecopsychology have provided part of the answer, but I feel that there is more. This paper is an attempt to take this exploration further.

Researching the paper has been like reading a spiritual teaching, that while it resonates with you, you are unable to quite touch it, to experience it, to taste it. You hear that teaching, some words of wisdom and a switch in you goes "click". Something that had been going around in the back of your mind, trying to make itself heard, pulling the rug out from under all your other endeavours, suddenly hears its voice being called and rushes forward. For you it is like a home coming, except for one thing. You have been estranged from this home for so long that the re-acquaintance takes a while. It is a slow process that must be handled gently as you are reintroduced and get to know those that you have not seen for so long. Maybe it is a process that never really ends? A relationship constantly revealing something new, the more that you are willing to give to it. A process of realization and discovery of who you are and where you are. A process of self-realization.

**Early Reflections**

On visiting India for the first time many years ago, once I had got use to a sense of familiarity, my senses stepped in to get me through this new world - but they were unprepared. I'm fond of India. It's a rich country with a culture and values that are struggling to survive in the onslaught of modern life. India is also an assault on the senses. Nothing is hidden from you there. Sights, sounds, smells, life, death, wealth, poverty, clean environments, filth and dirt. Life is presented to you in the face, unfortunately along with the unjustness of human society - but somehow all accepted with a dignity little seen here in the west.

The opposing extremes of Indian life either causes you to shut down, put up with and hope that

it will all be over soon, or to open up and let go. To given in and to simply allow yourself to experience and sense all that is around you. To allow your sensing body to experience the living world as it is.

### **Returning to the west**

Returning to the west, and at that time to city life, life seemed to be lacking something, sterile. Yes it was cleaner, fewer injustices and healthier, but there was something missing. As though in the push for a more comfortable, fairer, cleaner society, part of life had been ignored, or if not ignored, maybe carelessly overlooked? Somehow western life had carried on, happy with what it had or with what it was developing, but not seeming to question any omissions?

The senses did not have the same stimulation as in the east. However, finding myself out on the Welsh countryside a few years later, I had an opportunity to re-discover this stimulation, but through a different medium, the natural world.

Through spending time in one place, allowing the mind to quieten from distractions of elsewhere and to come into an awareness of where I was. To allow myself to become awakened to the sounds and movements around me. To notice smells, the light as it changed through the day, little shadows, a rustle of leaves in the undergrowth, the sound of a breeze through the trees. There was a heightened sense of awareness and this came to feel like the senses being overwhelmed by so much going on all around, but at the same time it felt like a re-acquaintance, a homecoming.

### **Sensing**

In the preface to his book, "The Spell of the Sensuous," David Abram writes, "[T]he simple premise of this book is that we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human." (Abram, 1996, p.ix). He argues that, "[T]oday we participate almost exclusively with other humans and our own human-made technologies" (Abram, 1996, p.ix), and suggests that this, "is a precarious situation, given our age-old reciprocity with the many-voiced landscape" (Abram, 1996, p.ix).

As a species we have evolved along side the many forces of the world, but they are in danger of becoming objects which we simply view in books, on television screens and through the windows of cars. While not completely denying the technologies around us, and this paper will not be arguing the pros and cons of our technologies, we are in danger of losing ourselves as we lose touch with the sensuous world of which we are part. In confining the more-than-human world to a set of objects outside of ourselves, the foundations are laid for disinterest towards them. "By apparently purging material reality of subjective experience, Galileo cleared the ground and Descartes laid the foundation for the construction of the objective or "disinterested" sciences," (Abram, 1996, p.32). However, "these sciences consistently overlooked our ordinary, everyday experience of the world around us" (Abram, 1996, p.32).

Although we benefit from, and suffer under, the technologies of the "objective or "disinterested" sciences," we still experience them through our sensing body. Those who bring these technologies

to us are deeply affected by the breathing world in which they move. Arriving at work inspired by a sun rising through early morning mist, or maybe frustrated through getting drenched while dashing from a car to a building during a storm. Pulling back the blinds to bright sunshine and distant hills my mind opens and brightens, I feel lighter. This world in which we interact takes us with it. "The world and I reciprocate one another" (Abram, 1996, p.33). For all that scientific discovery has told us that the earth circles the sun, we still speak of the sun rising and setting. Our sensing bodies seem to tell us something else, and it is by that experience that we live.

## **A Home Experience**

### ***HOW***

*small birds flit  
from bough  
to bough to bough*

*to bough to bough to bough  
(Snyder, 2004, p.29)*

Walking through the field of my land, the grass calls me to lie down. The sun is out and it is unusually warm for the time of year. Lying face down the smell of damp, dead grass from last year fills my aromatic experience. Young grass is growing through. I look up the field, for I am lying towards the bottom of a slight hill, to the backdrop of oak trees, interspersed with a sweet chestnut and hollies. My eye catches the movement of birds between trees and with that my ears becomes aware of their song that fills the air. Another layer of activity through the air that surrounds us.

I withdraw my senses back to the grass around me. The damp smell resumes its presence for me. Then my eye spots a small insect, only four or five millimetres long, climbing to the top of a blade of grass; its tree, its world. The insect's little tail wavers to help with balance at the tip of the grass blade. A short pause during which I sense the readiness of the little being to fly, holding itself in preparation to fly. Then wings open and it is gone.

In his book, "The Spell of the Sensuous", David Abram speaks of being caught in a cave in Bali while a storm raged outside. While sitting there watching the water cascade past the entrance to the cave his eye was distracted by a movement just in front of him; it was a spider spinning a web. His eyes, indeed his being was drawn into this realm of the spider spinning, until he noticed yet another spider spinning - he just had to slightly adjust his focus. In time he realized that there were, "many overlapping webs coming into being, radiating out at different rhythms from myriad centers poised - some higher, some lower, some minutely closer to my eyes and some farther" (Abram, 1996, p.18). So drawn in was Abram by the experience that the cascading water became silent to him. He, "had the distinct impression that I was watching the universe being born, galaxy upon galaxy...." (Abram, 1996, p.19).

## Perception *A Dent in a Bucket*

*Hammering a dent out of a bucket  
a woodpecker  
answers from the woods  
(Snyder, 2004, p.26)*

Abram's book is subtitled, "Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World." He explains, "[B]y the term "perception" we mean the concerted activity of *all* the body's senses as they function and flourish together" (Abram, 1996, p.59).

There are times when we "feel" the strain or difficulties that a friend or loved one is going through. The exertion of a race, the nerves while giving a presentation, the effort of having to lift something. Within that empathized moment we feel the other person's effort with our own body, we feel nerves within ourselves. It is a felt, visceral experience. Abram suggests that such is true when we enter into a true, reciprocal relationship with the landscape around us. We *feel* the nervousness of the vole as it scurries for cover, are *with* the ducks as they quack and nod their heads to one another in communication. Abram descriptively explains, "I perceive the wind surging through the branches of an aspen tree, I am unable, at first, to distinguish the sight of those trembling leaves from their delicate whispering. My muscles, too, feel the torsion as those branches bend, ever so slightly, in the surge," (Abram, 1996, p.60). As suggested earlier, through our disconnection from the natural world we lose this reciprocal dialogue of feeling. We lose the interaction of which we are part and tuned for. "[T]he eyes, the skin, the tongue, the ears, and nostrils - all are gates where our body receives the nourishment of otherness" (Abram, 1996, p.ix). In the same way as when we are cut off from friends we can feel as though there is a hole in our lives, cut off from this interaction with the voices of the wider world, we feel as though a loved one has left. We've come to a stage where we no longer recognize what we have lost. Paraphrasing Thomas Berry, Abram says, "I very much want to keep faith with the earthly world, which I don't experience merely as a bunch of objects. It is just as much a field of living subjects" (Abram, 1997). Unfortunately, modern society causes us to experience most of our non-human world as objects.

The interaction with the other, quite often happening before the verbal interaction arises *is* reciprocation. You are interacting with the other. Your perception of the other is an interaction with another. This reciprocation is possible because both your body and the body being perceived operates within time and all that exists within time is in a constant state of flux. That flux is more perceptible in the tree stretching in the strong wind, in the pond with ripples dancing across its surface, more perceptible in these than in a rock sitting there seemingly unmoved, but the rhythms of movement are within the rock - just pulsating much slower. The perception being spoken of here is a synchronization of my rhythms with those of the other. A coming into attunement with that with which I am interacting.

Such a view of perception does not allow for the possibility of inanimate objects. Everything is animate, everything moves, just some slower than others. Our experience of the world as we move through becomes one of constant dialogue, of felt experience with the sensible world. At least that is what our body or being needs, but our society breaks us apart from this interaction. Instead of a rich, sense filled experience, we have the blandness and sameness of modern technology. Instead of the varying patterns and moods of nature, utterances which, "never exactly repeat themselves," (Abram, 1996, p.64), we are constantly exposed to the mass-production of modern appliances, sounds drowned out by the roar of traffic and a night sky which is a stranger to many who live under the glare of street lights.

Abram feels that one of the causes of the harm that we are inflicting upon the earth is simply not recognizing that it is there. We as a race wish, indeed require a relationship with the sensuous world. However, as long as we speak of the sensuous world as being made up of objects, so that becomes our experience of the earth, and as we experience the earth as an object, so do we close off our sensory relationship to it.

### **Language**

Indigenous cultures are used to living in a world which speaks to them. These peoples hear the wind as a voice. The signs, sounds and movements of birds and animals as a language being spoken to them. These cultures, who exhibit a close and respectful relationship to the landscape around them, appear to be predominantly oral cultures. A common aspect of such cultures is the way that they become known to themselves through the way that the landscape and animals are reflected back to them. We commonly know this as "totemism" (Abram, 1996, p.123).

Abram suggests that one reason for felt alienation from the natural world by many in the world today, the lack of a felt relationship with those with whom we live, is due to language, and more specifically the written word. He does not suggest that it is the only reason and indeed in some cultures the effect of the written word has not been so pronounced. For example, "[W]hen the alphabet appeared in India, for example, it came into contact with an oral culture that was so alive, and functioning at so many levels of society, that writing was never able to displace it" (Abram, 1997).

Early written language was made up of shapes portraying aspects of the natural world that peoples were interacting with. Footprints, clouds, sun and serpents were examples and although this was a move away from a completely oral tradition, that connection with the more-than-human world was still maintained.

Abram's investigations led him to discover that an early version of the alphabet, or aleph-beth, had no vowels. The bones of the alphabet were the consonants, your breath was needed to breathe life into them. (Abram, 1997) To create the sounds needed to complete the word, the words and sounds were given sacredness and life through the needed presence of breath.

Through introducing vowels into the alphabet, the last remaining contact with the sensuous world

was lost and everything could now be conveyed through shapes on paper. Consequently even the air through which we move and are enveloped in through out our lives, the very air upon which we depend for each breath and which circulates through our bodies, is now just referred to as empty space. Is it little wonder that we pollute this air with little concern for what we are doing? The last vestiges of what is sacred, that with which we have a reciprocal relationship and have much to offer in gratitude for its existence, is objectified and forgotten about.

Does this mean that the written word should be abandoned? No, this is not what is being suggested. Rather, Abram says that our task, "is that of *taking up* the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land" (Abram, 1996, p.273). He suggests that we should be telling stories that want to be told again and again. Stories which tell of our varied landscape, the words sounding the sounds of our world, whispering the rhythms of spring, the song of the robin, the smell of the rose.

## **Reinhabitation**

### ***Whack***

*Green pinecone flakes  
pulled, gnawed clean around,  
wobbling, slowly falling  
scattering on the ground,  
whack the roof.  
Tree-top squirrel feasts  
- twitchy pine boughs.  
(Snyder, 2004, p.30)*

According to Gary Snyder, "in his opinion," he adds, to call oneself a deep ecologist one has to "meet the neighbours." That is one must be able to say, "ah, that is a green woodpecker, that is a greater spotted woodpecker." Snyder refers to this as etiquette. Being able to say, "Hello," knowing who is there. Then you can say that you are part of the community, the community that includes the wider non-human family. Until you are a member of that community and giving some of your time and energy to that community, until then you cannot call yourself a deep ecologist (Snyder, 1999).

Snyder uses the word "Reinhabitation" to describe such an idea and identifies three core practices that reinhabitation requires. These are, "feeling gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh)" (Snyder, 1995, p.188).

These three seemingly simple practices cannot only take us deeply into our relationship with the land, but also deeply into ourselves. In fact the second follows from the first

Feeling gratitude to it all asks us to recognize that we are dependent upon the place where we are.

We cannot live independently of others, and from that realization arises humility. Deepening our humility, we recognize that we are more than simply the physical human being. Humility causes us to listen and empathize with those around us. As this empathy grows, so do we start to expand our sense of self to include the wider community of not only humans but also the more-than-human-world.

From gratitude also comes a sense of sacred land. Land becomes sacred to us through a deep appreciation of how it supports us and enables us to live. We recognize the fragility of life, but also how from death comes life. What we take from the land we take in gratitude, but we are mindful to also give in return.

Taking responsibility for our own acts makes us recognize the responsibility that we have towards our place; towards our place and towards the beings that live there. Towards our place as part of the wider earth of which this place is very much a part, however large or small. Treating a part of the earth with harm is like harming the whole earth, we cannot isolate ourselves. Finally, in the deepest sense if we take responsibility for our place, we will be taking responsibility for ourselves.

The final practice is looking at the very basis, the very ground of any place, the energy systems that underlie it and which are fundamental to its well being. Again this is reflected back to the individual to recognize and nurture your own ground of being. This final practice is the basis for the other two, without which they cannot happen. Snyder is asking us to cultivate "wild mind" (Kaza, 1997), or to make contact with that wild mind that is in all of us. For Snyder wild mind is not synonymous with madness. He defines wild mind as having a, "self-disciplined elegance," and goes on to expand, "[P]ractically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humour, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking, brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness" (Snyder, 1996).

So reinhabitation is no small practice. Snyder suggests that the demands from a commitment to a place, "are so physically and intellectually intense that it is a moral and spiritual choice as well" (Snyder, 1995, p.191). It is against the current trends of moving on to make a quick profit or because you are simply being bored. It is also a practice of knowing yourself through the land.

Reinhabitation does not exclude traveling, nomadic peoples do, moving with the seasons to find grazing for their livestock, or where they know they will find favourable hunting. Within that area of movement, knowing the land well, respecting it for what it offers to them and only taking that, no more. Reinhabitation requires restraint - a deepening spiritual practice. With time a deeper and deeper familiarity is generated towards the place and a learnt knowledge can be passed onto the following generations.

We move into a place and we find ourselves slowing down, noticing more, hearing things that our ears were deaf to before. There are always layers to the land that we can go into, and as we go deeper into the land so do we go deeper into ourselves.

## **Conclusion**

### ***The Bear Mother***

*She veils herself  
to speak of eating salmon  
Teases me with  
"What do you know of my ways"  
And kisses me through the mountain.*

*Through and under its layers, its  
gullies, its folds;  
Her mouth full of blueberries;  
We share.  
(Snyder, 1996, p.113)*

The Australian Aborigines have taken their oral culture, and merging it with their ancient Dreamtime myths, have created a network of routes across the beautiful but harsh landscape of Australia. Language becomes a means of remembering pathways across the desert, through the singing of Dreamtime stories to bring to mind images of the desert. Similarly the physical realities in the desert aid the memory of stories to be sung. A reciprocal relationship is established (Abram, 1996). These are ways and lore that have been passed down for generations and as I understand it, is holding on by a tenuous grip. These are inhabitory people. They know their place and themselves through doing their time on the land, and continuing to do so. It is an ongoing process.

We need to rediscover this process. Reinhabit our land, breathe deeply of the air and learn to listen to the more-than-human world around us. Our roots are shallow right now and we need to allow them to reach deeper. Then we can better understand where we are and where we might go.

The readings for this paper have enriched my experience of the land on which I live, but I sense how much deeper there is to go. As Gary Snyder suggests this process of reinhabitation is one of learning Old Ways but also learning new ones (Snyder, 1995).

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