

RETURNING TO OUR ANIMAL SENSES

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I'm beginning these thoughts during the winter solstice, the dark of the year, during a night so long that even the trees and the rocks are falling asleep. Moon has glanced at us through the thick blanket of clouds once or twice, but mostly left us to dream and drift through the shadowed night. Those of us who hunger for the light are beginning to taste the wild darkness, and to swallow it—taking the night, quietly, into our bodies.

According to a tale told in various ways by diverse indigenous peoples, the fiery sun is held, at this moment, inside the body of the earth. Each evening, at sunset, the sun slips down into the ground; during the night it journeys through the density underfoot, and in the morning we watch it, far to the east, rise up out of the ground and climb into the sky. But during the long nights of winter, and especially during the solstice, the sun lingers longer in the ground, feeding the dark earth with its fire, impregnating the depths with the diverse life that will soon, after several moons of gestation, blossom forth upon the earth's surface.

It is a tale born of a way of thinking very different from the ways most of us think today. A story that has, we might say, very little to do with "the facts" of the matter. And yet the tale of the sun's journey within the earth has a curious resonance for many of us who hear it, despite our awareness that the events it describes are not literally true. For the story brings us close to our senses, and to our direct, bodily awareness of the world around us.

Our spontaneous, sensory experience of the sun is indeed of a fiery presence that rises and sets. Despite all that we have learned about the stability of the sun relative to the earth, no matter how thoroughly we have convinced our intellects that it is the *earth* that is really moving while the sun basically holds its place, our unaided animal senses still experience the sun as rising up from the distant earth every morning, and sinking beneath the ground every evening. Whether we are scientists or slackers, we all speak of the “rising” and the “setting” of the sun, for this remains our primary experience of the matter. Which is why I am pausing, at this moment, to feel the sun’s fire nourishing the deep earth far below my feet.

Going to grade school in the sixties and seventies, I was taught not to trust my senses—the *senses*, I was told again and again, *are deceptive*. This was a common theme in science classes at a time when all the sciences seemed to aspire to the pure precision of physics—we learned that truth is never in the appearances but elsewhere, whether in a mysterious, submicroscopic realm that we could reach only by means of complex instruments, or in an apparently disembodied domain of numbers and abstract equations. The world to which our senses gave us direct access came to seem a kind of illusory, derivative dimension, less essential than that truer realm hidden behind the appearances.

In my first year at college I had a rather inane physics professor who would periodically try to shock the class by exclaiming, wild-eyed, that the chair on which he was sitting was not really solid at all, but was constituted almost entirely of empty space! “Why, then, don’t you fall on your ass?” I would think. And I began to wonder whether we didn’t have it all backwards. I began to wonder if by our continual put-down of the senses, and of the sensuous world—by our endless *dissing* of the world of direct experience—we were not disparaging the truest world of all, the only world we could really count on, the

primary realm that secretly supports all those other “realities,” subatomic or otherwise.

The sensory world, to be sure, is ambiguous and open-ended, filled with uncertainty. There are good reasons to be cautious in this enigmatic realm, and so to look always more closely, to listen more attentively, trying to sense things more deeply. Nothing here is ever completely certain or fixed: the cloud-shadows darkening the large boulder across the field turn out, when I step closer, to be crinkly black lichens radiating across the rock’s surface; the discarded tire half buried in the beach suddenly transforms into a dozing seal that barks at our approach and galumphs into the water. The world we experience with our unaided senses is fluid and animate, shifting and transforming in response to our own shifts of position and of mood. A memory from a hike on the south coast of Java: It is a sweltering hot day, yet a strong wind is clearly stirring the branches and leaves of some trees across the field. As I step toward those trees in order to taste the moving air, the wind rustling the leaves abruptly metamorphoses into a bunch of monkeys foraging for food among the branches!

Such encounters, and the lack of certainty they induce, may indeed lead us to reject sensory experience entirely, and to quest for “truth” in some other, less ambiguous, dimension. Alternatively, these experiences might lead us to assume that truth itself is a kind of trickster—shape-shifting and Coyote-like—and that the senses are our finest guides to its approach.

It seems to me that those of us who work to preserve wild nature must work as well for a return to our senses, and for a renewed respect for sensorial modes of knowing. For the senses are our most immediate access to the more-than-human natural world. The eyes, the ears, the nostrils catching faint whiffs of sea salt on the breeze, the fingertips grazing the smooth bark of a madrone, this porous skin rippling with chills at the felt presence of another animal—our bodily

senses bring us into relation with the breathing earth at every moment. If humankind has forgotten its thorough dependence upon the earthly community of beings, it can only be because we've forgotten (or dismissed as irrelevant) the sensory dimension of our lives. The senses are what is most wild in us—capacities we share, in some manner, not only with other primates but also with most other entities in the living landscape, from earthworms to eagles. Flowers responding to sunlight, tree roots extending rootlets in search of water, even the chemotaxis of a simple bacterium—here, too, are sensation and sensitivity, distant variants of our own sentience. Apart from breathing and eating, the senses are our most intimate link with the living land, the primary way that the earth has of influencing our moods and of guiding our actions.

Think of a honeybee drawn by vision and a kind of olfaction into the heart of a wildflower—sensory perception thus effecting the intimate coupling between this organism and its local world. Our own senses, too, have coevolved with the sensuous earth that enfolds us. Our eyes have taken shape in subtle interaction with oceans and air, formed and informed by the shifting patterns of the visible world. Our ears are now tuned, by their very structure, to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. Sensory experience, we might say, is the way that our body binds its life to the other lives that surround it, the way the earth couples itself to our thoughts and our dreams. *Perception is the glue that binds our separate nervous systems into the larger, encompassing ecosystem.* As the bee's compound eye draws it close to the wildflower, as a salmon dreams its way through gradients of scent toward its home stream, so our own senses have long tuned our awareness to particular aspects and shifts in the land, inducing particular moods, insights, and even actions that we mistakenly attribute solely to ourselves. If we ignore or devalue sensory experience, we lose our primary source of alignment with the larger ecology, imperiling both ourselves and the earth in the process.

I'm not saying that we should renounce abstract reason and simply abandon ourselves to our senses, or that we should halt our scientific questioning and the patient, careful analysis of evidence. Not at all: I'm saying that as thinkers and as scientists we should strive to let our insights be informed by our direct, sensory experience of the world around us; and further, that we should strive to express our experimental conclusions in a language accessible to direct experience, and so to gradually bring our science into accord with the animal intelligence of our breathing bodies. (I think of Howie Wolke's superb essay, a few years back in *Wild Earth*, on how science that lacks a visceral connection to what it studies is lousy science. He's right! For such science denies the scientists' own embeddedness in the very world that they seek to study. Such science is not really Darwinian enough—it pretends that we humans, by virtue of our capacity for cool reason, can somehow spring ourselves free from our coevolved, carnal embedment in a more-than-human web of influences.) Sensory experience, when it is honored, renews the bond between our bodies and the breathing earth. Only a culture that disdains and dismisses the senses could neglect the living land as thoroughly as our culture neglects the land.

Many factors have precipitated our current estrangement from the sensuous surroundings, and many more factors prolong and perpetuate this estrangement. One of the most potent of these powers is also one of the least recognized: our everyday language, our ways of speaking. What we *say* has such a profound influence upon what we *see*, and *hear*, and *taste* of the world! To be sure, there are ways of speaking that keep us close to our senses, styles of speaking that encourage and enhance the sensory reciprocity between our bodies and the body of the earth. But there are also ways of wielding words that simply deaden our senses, rendering us oblivious to the sensuous surroundings, and hence impervious to the voice of the land. Perhaps the most pervasive of these is the habit of endlessly *objectifying* the more-than-human

world around us, writing and speaking of every earthly entity (moss, mantis, or mountain) as though it were a determinate, quantifiable object lacking all sensations and desires—as though in order to describe another being with any precision we first had to strip it of its living otherness, or had to envision it as a set of passive mechanisms with no spontaneity, no subjectivity, *no active agency of its own*. As though a toad or a cottonwood was a fixed and finished entity waiting to be figured out by us, rather than an enigmatic presence with whom we have been drawn into a living relationship.

Actually, when we are really awake to the life of our senses—when we are really watching with our animal eyes and listening with our animal ears—we discover that *nothing* in the world around us is directly experienced as a passive or inanimate object. Each thing, each entity meets our gaze with its own secrets, and if we lend it our attention we are drawn into a dynamic interaction wherein we are taught and sometimes transformed by this other being. In the realm of direct, sensorial experience, everything is animate, everything *moves* (although, of course, some things—like stones and mountains—move much slower than other things). If while walking along the river I find myself suddenly moved, deeply, by the sheer wall of granite towering above the opposite bank, how, then, can I claim that the granite rock is inanimate, that that rock does not move? It moves *me* every time that I encounter it! Shall I claim that this movement is entirely subjective, a purely mental experience that has nothing to do with that actual rock? Or shall I admit that it is a physical, bodily experience induced by the powerful presence of this other being, that indeed my body is palpably moved by this other body—and hence that I and the rock are not related as a mental “subject” to a material “object” but rather as one kind of dynamism to another kind of dynamism, as two different ways of being animate, two very different ways of being earth?

If we speak of matter as essentially inanimate, or inert, we establish the need for a graded hierarchy of beings: stones have no agency

or experience whatsoever; bacteria have a minimal degree of life; plants have a bit more life, with a rudimentary degree of sensitivity; “lower” animals are more sentient, yet still stuck in their instincts; “higher” animals are more aware; while humans alone are really awake and intelligent. In this manner we continually isolate human awareness above, and apart from, the sensuous world. If, however, we assume that matter is animate (or “self-organizing”) from the get-go, then hierarchies vanish, and we are left with a diversely differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its own gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above but in the very midst of this living web, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape.

If we continue to speak of other animals as less mysterious than ourselves, if we speak of the forests as insentient systems, and of rivers and winds as basically passive elements, then we deny our direct, visceral experience of those forces. And so we close down our senses, and come to live more and more in our heads. We seal our intelligence in on itself, and begin to look out at the world only as spectators—never as participants.

If, on the other hand, we wish to recall what it is like to feel fully a part of this wild earth—if, that is, we wish to reclaim our place as plain members of the biotic community—then we shall have to start speaking somewhat differently. It will be a difficult change, given the intransigence of old habits, and will probably take decades of careful attention and experimentation before we begin to get it right. But it will also be curiously simple, and strangely familiar, something our children can help us remember. If we really wish to awaken our senses, and so to renew the solidarity between ourselves and the rest of the earth, then we must acknowledge that the myriad things around us have their own active agency, their own active influence upon our lives and our thoughts—and also, of course, upon one another. We must begin to speak of the sensuous surroundings in the way that our breathing bodies really experience them—as active, as animate, as alive.