

## Spirit, Land, and Home: Paganism and the Earth

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Contemporary Pagan practices focus on the spiritual as it manifests immanently in the world rather than as existing transcendentally above it. From this perspective a person's primary spiritual responsibility is to grow into greater harmony with the world's underlying character rather than seeking salvation from it.<sup>1</sup>

And yet...

The Pagan Roman Empire caused the extinction of elephants, rhinoceroses, and zebras in North Africa partly as a result of its using them in gladiatorial contests for entertainment.<sup>2</sup> The Pagan Greeks deforested their land, although many realized what they were doing, even passing laws against it.<sup>3</sup> The Pagan Easter islanders brought about the collapse of their civilization through the extermination of native palms. Pagan Anasazi and Maya alike undermined the agricultural ecologies of their lands, with human-caused deforestation and erosion contributing heavily to the failure of these cultures.<sup>4</sup> Babylon destroyed the fertility of the soils that once sustained the great cities of the Fertile Crescent.<sup>5</sup>

This list is not trivial. It offers little comfort to those thinking practicing an immanent spirituality automatically leads to good treatment of the earth. If there is a unique Pagan relationship to ecology and nature, it is more complex than a simple immanent/transcendent distinction suggests.

When we examine ecologically failed Pagan cultures, we often find the blindness caused by power and ego played a role. Power and ego are old foes of good relations between people as well as between people and their world. In other cases simple ignorance was also a part of the picture. Had needed knowledge been available, these

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<sup>1</sup> The common qualities of Pagan spirituality are further developed in Gus diZerega. *Pagans and Christians: The Personal Spiritual Experience*, (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Press, 2001), pp. 3-49.

<sup>2</sup> J. Donald Hughes, *Pan's Travail: Environmental problems of the Ancient Greeks and Romans*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 100-108.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 73-90.

<sup>4</sup> David Stuart and Susan B. Moczgamba-McKinsey, *Anasazi America: 17 Centuries on the Road From Center Place*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> J. Donald Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1975), pp. 34-5.

societies arguably would have adapted more successfully. But in many traditional Pagan societies nature speaks to those who listen. Why weren't they listening?

Within any culture and spiritual tradition human beings have always had difficulties walking their talk. This is why Pagan societies so often emphasized harmony as their ideal, and focused so many of their ritual cycles and healings on restoring a disrupted web of harmonious relationships. People need frequent reminding and their relationships often need healing. Greed, stupidity, pride, and ignorance are hardly unique to the Christian and secular world.

But being Pagan can matter, perhaps profoundly. Let us see how.

The tribes of the North Pacific coast possessed both the technology and to some degree the incentives to decimate salmon runs on most of the region's rivers. Yet when Europeans arrived the runs were enormous, as were the harvests of fish for consumption and trade. Salmon taking was enmeshed in a moral and ritual framework that worked to preserve abundant runs not simply for a few decades, but for thousands of years. Yet their oral tradition frequently told of disasters brought about by greedy, disrespectful, and thoughtless behavior.<sup>6</sup>

Native American societies did not live in effortless harmony with their world. They learned through a combination of spiritual insights and hard knocks. As Joseph Bruchac reminded a mostly white audience where I was present, Indians are people first, Indians second.<sup>7</sup> And people everywhere are prone to all the vices of pride, greed, and stupidity.

Their medicine people's capacity to listen to and respect nature was not always enough to prevent excess, but it seemed enough to enable the tribe to learn from and

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<sup>6</sup> Joseph E. Taylor, III, *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fishing Crisis*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), pp. 13-38; Jim Lichatowich, *Salmon Without Rivers: A History of the Pacific Salmon Crisis*, (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1999), pp. 28-41. The same traditions existed in Asian salmon cultures. Robert M. Torrance, *The Spiritual Quest: Transcendence in Myth, religion, and Science*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994), p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Spoken at the 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Interdisciplinary Environment and Community Conference, Saratoga Springs, NY, February, 2004.

remember the consequences of foolish actions. Often rooted in the wisdom of shamans, these tribes' oral traditions incorporated knowledge moderns have yet to learn.<sup>8</sup>

A recent example of re-learning concerns Hantavirus, a serious health threat in the southwest, and later elsewhere. In 1993, when Hantavirus began killing young Navajos, the medical world was initially stumped. Interestingly, Navajo traditionalists did not get sick. They also followed the old teaching that deer mice must not be allowed in human dwellings. The younger people knew this was a silly superstition, and some caught the often fatal illness passed on by viruses contained in mouse urine and feces.

According to the U. S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Some of the Navajo elders had predicted the 1993 HPS [Hantavirus pneumonic syndrome?] outbreak. In addition, their oral tradition says that in 1918 and 1933-34, there were similar outbreaks, after increases in rainfall produced increases in the piñon crop and the number of mice."<sup>9</sup> Navajo traditionalists not only knew the mice were involved, they knew a connection existed between the illness and the climate, giving them predictive power unmatched by Westerners.

By themselves, these observations only a prudential caution for why people should believe in moral and spiritual underpinnings for their relations with nature. It works. But when people are involved, prudential reasoning has a fatal weakness

Tempted by short term gains, people generally overestimate the anticipated benefits and underestimate the costs of setting aside traditional rules and practices. Greed and rationalization are powerful human vices, particularly when probable costs are far in the future or fall on someone else's shoulders. Both are normally the case with environmental destruction.

### **NeoPagans and Modernity**

Ecological harmony requires right practices as well as the right knowledge, and right practices require the right *experiences of value* in order to sustain those practices

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<sup>8</sup> For an example of the depth of information that can be contained within an oral culture, see William Irwin Thompson, *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth and Science*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 1-42.

<sup>9</sup> Center for Disease Control, All About Hantaviruses, <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hanta/hps/noframes/navajo.htm>

when we are tempted to set them aside. Ethical and experiential spiritual practices reinforce wise behavior, offsetting our short sightedness and capacity to rationalize. With this observation we can probe more deeply into what Pagan spirituality offers us. I will focus on American NeoPaganism, that part of the Pagan world taking its primary inspiration from Wicca as passed down by Gerald Gardner, from reconstructions of pre-Christian European Pagan beliefs and practices, and from claims by some to having inherited very old family traditions. Unlike indigenous Native American and African diasporic religion, NeoPaganism is characterized by modernized Westerners' return to an immanent and world affirming spirituality after a break of over 1000 years.<sup>10</sup>

NeoPagans face a different challenge than their cousins in Native American, Asian and African derived traditions, who seek to adapt their traditional practices to the modern world. Western Pagans must translate their modern sensibility into Pagan spirituality. But can a modern mentality learn to listen to the Earth? Can it learn to respect it? And why, after all, has the Earth fallen so silent to modern people?

The modern world differs dramatically from any that preceded it. In many ways we inhabit a cultural mutation as different from what came before as agricultural society was from the hunting and horticultural societies that preceded it. For the purposes of this paper the most important distinctions between modern and pre-modern societies seem to be:

1. Nearly all modern people no longer make their living directly from the land.
2. Equality in human relations is more fundamental than hierarchy.
3. Our culture justifies itself in terms of individualism, science, and progress rather than membership in corporate groups, religion, and tradition.

I have argued elsewhere that the modern world is in important respects more open to establishing harmony with nature than the agricultural societies preceding it. Most people today do not have to personally struggle with nature to grow crops. They relate to the natural world as a place of healing and value rather than as a threat. They reverse the

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<sup>10</sup> I write "largely" because some, but hardly all, Odinists embrace pre-modern racial and tribal identities, not yet comprehending that all people are worthy of respect.

frequent experience of agricultural peoples that nature is resistant to control, coming in that sense into greater similarity with hunting and gathering cultures<sup>11</sup>

Further, while often disconnected from the natural world, modern institutions are characterized as emergent orders rather than power hierarchies, and so are in principle able to be harmonized with ecological processes. In important respects our task is easier than that facing Babylon or the Anasazi.<sup>12</sup> We have the institutions and knowledge physically to harmonize our society with nature.<sup>13</sup>

What we crucially lack is a means for legitimizing our experience of nature as more than a personal preference. We lack the ethical certainty that our current course of action is *wrong*. We have no culturally respected argument for experiencing the world as sacred, as a Thou. We need to be able to hear the natural world speak to us again. Once it does, most of us will not forget. And we will act accordingly.

### **It and Thou in Nature**

If Spirit is immanent in the world, there is nowhere in the world where More-than-human awareness does not exist. The great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber writes that human beings encounter the world in one of two primary relationships: *I* and *It* or *I* and *Thou*. Both *It* and *Thou* imply an *I*, but an *I* in different kinds of relationships. “Every *It* is bounded by others; *It* exists only through being bounded by others. But when *Thou* is spoken, there is no thing. *Thou* has no bounds.”<sup>14</sup> There is an irreducible depth and mystery in *Thou* that does not exist in *It*. An *I/It* relationship can be either external or internal, but in both cases the object is still a thing, as is most unambiguously the case with behavioral psychology.

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<sup>11</sup> Gus diZerega, Nature Religion and the Modern World, *Sacred Cosmos*, November, 2000. Also available at [www.dizerega.com](http://www.dizerega.com)

<sup>12</sup> Gus diZerega, Rethinking the Obvious: Modernity and Living Respectfully With Nature, *The Trumpeter: Journal of Ecosophy*, Winter, 1997; Towards an Ecocentric Political Economy, *The Trumpeter*, Fall, 1996; Unexpected Harmonies: Self-Organization in Liberal Modernity and Ecology, *The Trumpeter*, 10:1, Winter 1993, 25-32. Also available at [www.dizerega.com](http://www.dizerega.com)

<sup>13</sup> Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1999); William McDonough and Michael Braungart, *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*, (New York: North Point, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., (New York: Charles Scribner, 1958), p. 4.

Buber offers us the example of encountering a tree to illustrate his insight.<sup>15</sup>

I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air – and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of [physical] law . . .

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number, in pure numerical relation.

In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution..

It can however come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*. I have been seized by the power of its exclusiveness.

To effect this it is not necessary for me to give up any of the ways in which I consider the tree. . . . Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and type, law and number, indivisibly united in this event.

Buber closes his discussion, writing

The tree will have a consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience. But do you wish, though seeming to succeed in it with yourself, once again to disintegrate that which cannot be disintegrated? I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree but the tree itself.

The question Buber criticizes could be asked by a traditional psychologist: Is the tree aware of us? For Buber, *whatever the answer*, the encounter is removed from a Thou relation disintegrating it back into an It relation, treating awareness as bounded within

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp 7-8.

objects, be these objects ourselves or perhaps a tree, and so misses his point. Yet for us today this question seems entirely reasonable.

If everything is in some way a manifestation of Spirit, there is at least a possibility of entering into an I-Thou relationship with everything. Why then is Nature so silent? Why do we live in a world of *Its*? To understand why let us work backwards, turning first to science, or rather, to how science is done and what we usually think it means.

### **Scientism and the Rise of a Kosmopathic Society**

The views of science as the sole reliable source of truth arose within a Europe traumatized by the Thirty Years War, an orgy of mutual extermination ostensibly in the name of religion. When peace finally returned it did not do so on theological or moral grounds, for the combatants could find none. Peace took its first hesitant steps in 1648, when the Treaty of Westphalia required rulers to respect the beliefs of other rulers and their subjects, but the people of any country or principality must follow the religion of their ruler. Catholics, Calvinists, and Lutherans finally stopped killing one another, at least internationally, but genuine religious toleration long remained a dream.<sup>16</sup>

The slaughter took parts of central Europe 100 years to recover their populations. Sensitive Europeans were horrified, and began seeking standards for truth that could speak more authoritatively than some fanatic's fevered reading of scripture. Accepting the monotheistic belief in a single authoritative standard for truth, they sought more certain sources than was offered in ambiguous Biblical texts. The modern ideal of science was the result.

Science is a body of knowledge evaluated through a group of procedures developed so people of many points of view could agree on common standards for testing and evaluating claims about the material world. Measurement, prediction, experiment, and logic promised certainty could be returned to the world. Having proved effective in the natural sciences, these methods then offered hope such knowledge could be universally discovered and applied.

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<sup>16</sup> This and the next few paragraphs are indebted to Stephen Toulmin's analysis in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) and Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning*, (London: Routledge, 1992).

But these methods do not generate explanations. They *test* explanations. They do not so much discover truth as reveal error.<sup>17</sup> This subtle distinction was forgotten as enthusiasts, carried away by science's success, argued they had found the road to certainty.

The rise of the scientific ideal excluded the idolatrous worship of texts. It also ignored Aristotle's wise admonition to tailor our methods of study to the subject rather than the other way around.<sup>18</sup> Science's successes led many to claim the still unknown was confined to propositions amenable to scientific methods. The monotheistic conception of a single path to truth shifted increasingly from the Bible to science. What could not be directly investigated by scientific procedures was nonmaterial, and what was nonmaterial became immaterial.

A sticking point was awareness. Consciousness can not be measured or predicted, nor can it be rationally explained or experimentally tested.<sup>19</sup> Awareness is exceptionally ill suited to scientific investigation. Some scientists judged it to be epiphenomenal, a gaudy mask covering up the real causes of change in the world. A few even doubted whether consciousness existed at all. Wedded to the ideal of impersonal truth, they doubted the scientific value, and sometimes even the reality, of mental qualities such as empathy and good judgment. Our own minds were simply passive recorders of experiences, reflecting the forces that formed them and to which they were subject.

For our purposes what is most significant about this view is its curious harmony with a serious psychological defect. A person incapable of recognizing others as beings to be empathized with is often called a sociopath.<sup>20</sup> The technical term is "anti-social personality disorder." For people with these characteristics, others exist solely as objects to be manipulated. Sociopaths appear incapable of attaching ethical weight to other people, or putting themselves in others' shoes. A sociopath is not usually a violent

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<sup>17</sup> The classic statement is Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, rev. ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1968).

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 1, ch. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Consider the difficulties in coming up with a way to test whether artificial intelligence exists. See Hubert L. Dreyfuss, *What Computers Still Can't Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992)

<sup>20</sup> Harvey Cleckley, *The Mask of Sanity: An Attempt to Clarify Some Issues About the So-Called Psychopathic Personality*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., (Emily S. Cleckley, 1988). Compare with Midgley, *Science as Salvation*, especially pp. 73-4, 110-12, 153-4.

criminal, but he or she is incapable of relating to anyone or anything as a Thou.

Everything is an It, useful solely as a means to whatever ends the sociopath pursues.

Rooted in the trauma of religious war, the dominant ways of thinking and defining truth in the modern world can fairly be called *kosmopathic*: we are immersed in a world of “Its.” Knowledge and truth are supposedly impersonal, and apply to a world of objects, hence our society’s fascination with power and control. That is how one best deals with objects.

### **Active Mind and Intuitive Knowledge**

We now know the ideal of objective impersonal knowledge of the world does not describe how science is practiced. Human cognition does not work that way. All explicit knowledge rests on a tacit foundation requiring our mind’s active involvement.<sup>21</sup> No observation exists without judgment, interpretation, and evaluation. But while no scientist really practices it, the false ideal of impersonal objectivity as the criterion for truth has penetrated to the core of our society.

Yet science itself would come to a standstill if it depended only on its methodologies of measurement, experiment, prediction, and logic. These criteria do not generate hypotheses; they are only good at locating error. But without hypotheses science goes nowhere. Creative scientists arrive at their hypotheses by other means.<sup>22</sup>

What is sometimes called the “psychology of discovery” is different from processes of measuring and analyzing so central to evaluating those hypotheses’ reliability. If we define the calculative and evaluative kinds of awareness our society so values and rewards as “normal” and “rational”, discovery arises from “abnormal” and “a-rational” states of consciousness, states often described as “intuitive.”

Intuition manifests as sudden insights, strong hunches, and “feelings” that serve as guides even when the person having these experiences cannot offer a rational

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<sup>21</sup> A classic study of this issue is Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-critical Philosophy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>22</sup> By creative scientists I refer to those whose develop revolutionary theories in Thomas Kuhn’s sense, as distinguished from what he termed “normal science.” Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.(Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

argument to back them up. Intuition is holistic rather than linear. It presents itself as a pattern of components where the pattern and not its parts is what is attended to.

Because intuition goes beyond the meaning of the data immediately in front of us, to identify a pattern or otherwise hidden meaning, it is the major source for new scientific hypotheses. These insights are then evaluated by the methods of scientific evaluation. Linda Jean Shepherd has written of intuition's central role in science and engineering, and I take many of the following examples from her excellent discussion.

Albert Einstein wrote "It [the optics of motion] occurred to me by intuition. And music is the driving force behind this intuition. . . . My new discovery is the result of musical perception." Einstein also wrote "There is no logical way to the discovery of these elementary laws." He emphasized "[O]nly intuition, resting on sympathetic understanding, can lead to [these laws]. . . . The state of mind that enables a man to do work of this kind is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover. . . ."<sup>23</sup>

Friedrich August Kekule was dozing in front of his fireplace and dreamed of a snake biting its tail. Shepherd writes "He awoke 'as if by the flash of lightning' understanding the ring structure of benzene, a problem that had long eluded chemists." Kekule later urged his fellow chemists to "learn to dream."<sup>24</sup>

Niels Bohr dreamed of atoms as organized in a way analogous to a planetary system. The result was the "Bohr Model" of atomic structure and another Nobel Prize.<sup>25</sup> Dimitri Mendeleev dreamed of the periodic table that is used to arrange the elements.<sup>26</sup>

Barbara McClintock offers a final example. She received the Nobel Prize for her discovery that genetic elements can move in orderly ways from one chromosome to another. McClintock's discovery came from her long study of corn, about which she observed<sup>27</sup>

No two plants are exactly alike. They're all different, and as a consequence you have to know that difference. . . . I start with the seedling, and I don't want to

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<sup>23</sup> Linda Jean Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil: The Feminine Face of Science*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), p. 214.

<sup>24</sup> Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil* p. 218.

<sup>25</sup> Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil* p. 218.

<sup>26</sup> Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil* p. 219.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on gender and Science*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 164. See also Midgley, *Wisdom, Information and Wonder*, pp. 38-44.

leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately, and I find it a great pleasure to know them.

McClintock's connection with her subjects of study did not stop with corn. She observed of the chromosomes<sup>28</sup>

The more I worked with them, the bigger and bigger [the chromosomes] got. And when I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. I was right down there with them, and everything got big. I was even able to see the internal parts of the chromosomes – actually everything was there. It surprised me because I actually felt as if I was right down there and these were my friends.

Compare McClintock's statement with Buber's description of entering into a *Thou* relation with a tree.

What stands out in these examples is the necessary role played by non-ordinary modes of awareness, such as dreams, trance, reverie, and animistic awareness, in making some of the most important scientific advances of our time. Shepherd argues perception of this kind is common to creative work within science and engineering, the two fields supposedly most wedded to the impersonal objective ideal for knowledge. William Irwin Thompson observes of this kind of perception that “the involuntary associations that come out of the blue do seem to have a pattern-recognition to them, one that works more through systems of correspondences and shapes than logic; these correspondences and homeomorphs are not arbitrary but seem to operate with the expanded perception of the nature of identity that is beyond what we construe as logical identity.”<sup>29</sup>

These modes of awareness also give us insights on issues not testable by scientific methods. Dreams, trance, intuitions, and animistic awareness are major sources of

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<sup>28</sup> Keller, *Gender and Science*, p. 165. See also Shepherd, *Lifting the Veil*, pp. 66-74.

<sup>29</sup> William Irwin Thompson, *Imaginary Landscape: Making Worlds of Myth and Science*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 81

information in shamanic practices and Pagan cultures in general<sup>30</sup> It is irrational simply to discount these experiences because they are not testable by what are traditionally called empirical methods *when the same kinds of experiences provide insight into dimensions of reality more amenable to these tests.* Those who do ignore Aristotle's advice of letting the subject studied determine the methods, replacing it with a methodological monoculture.

But what becomes of standards of truth if dreams and visions are legitimate sources of knowledge? We are better at finding patterns than evaluating the patterns we find.<sup>31</sup> We also know dreams, visions and hunches are not always reliable, and their interpretation is rarely literal. This is why scientific methods are so important when dealing with issues amenable to scientific investigation. They weed out lots of errors.

But throughout the world societies have developed ways to evaluate people's spiritual insights when those insights claim general significance. They confront the same problems scientific communities do when facing new theories, and have done so for thousands of years. New insights are evaluated by elders with long experience in terms of their tribe's traditions. The results of any innovations are evaluated.

These approaches do not always succeed. But neither does science. Despite the evidence, major scientific discoveries are sometimes rejected until long after the death of the person who first saw the connections. This happened to Alfred Wegner and his theory of continental drift.<sup>32</sup> Vital data is ignored because it does not fit the model.<sup>33</sup> Even the most important discoveries have later been subsumed into very different theories, as happened to Newtonian mechanics.

In both science and spiritual and shamanic practices, major insights are normally preceded by lengthy study and immersion. That non-ordinary states of awareness are part

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<sup>30</sup> Wanda Easter Burch, *Dance Halls of the Dead: A Journey Through Dreams Into Healing, Shaman's Drum*, 66, 2004, 21-30; E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1951), pp. 102-34.

<sup>31</sup> David Spangler and William Irwin Thompson, *Reimagination of the World: A Critique of the New Age, Science, and Popular Culture*, (Santa fe, NM: Bear and Company, 1991), pp. 37-9.

<sup>32</sup> John Ziman, *Public Knowledge: The Social Dimension of Science*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 56-7.

<sup>33</sup> Midgley, *Science as Salvation*, p. 59.

of the discovery process does not mean that answers and insights come easily.<sup>34</sup> Intuitions must be interpreted correctly. It took a Kekule to interpret a snake with its tail in its mouth as the key to solving one of chemistry's most challenging problems. The same observation holds outside science. Because its theories are amenable to testing by what we generalize as the scientific method, science deals with easier phenomena to evaluate.

### **An Unnatural Silence**

Confusions about the scientific method cannot fully explain why our world no longer speaks to us. Nature has fallen silent in societies other than our own. Apparently this happened once they began focusing almost exclusively on the worlds of men and women alone.

In *The Spell of the Sensuous* David Abram argues that reading, which you are currently doing, is the most important factor in cutting us off from experiencing the other-than-human world. Reading, Abram writes, is a kind of magic, an altering of consciousness where we look at symbols on a page that can bring about intense experiences of sounds, colors, emotions, images and information. He describes this as a kind of synesthesia.<sup>35</sup> We take this magic for granted because we have practiced it all our lives.

Since so much of our explicit thinking now takes place via its dependence on the written word, we are unaware of how much those symbols shape our thought. Abram observes that in Plato's *Republic*, when Socrates asked the Athenians what justice was, they gave him examples of just action. However, Socrates insisted on a definition for *justice* removed from any particular example. This new way of thinking about abstract "justice" was rooted in literacy, enabling words like justice to be, removed from any particular context, taking on a life of their own.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Polanyi's discussion of discovery is important although not addressing exactly the same issue, *Personal Knowledge*, pp. 120-31.

<sup>35</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, (New York: Pantheon, 1996), pp. 124-32. The entire book is a blessing that, for me, gets wiser each time I read it.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110. This distinction is still with us in differences between common and statute law. Legislators try and apply a common standard to diverse cases. Common law judges try and discover how a law that is never abstractly and universally defined applies to new cases.

In *Cosmopolis*, Stephen Toulmin makes a similar point, observing that medieval and renaissance theologians dealt happily with a plurality of views, all considered legitimate. “Only after the invention of ethical theory, when *dogma* acquired an imperative sense, were people finally convinced that moral questions have unique, simple, and authoritative answers.”<sup>37</sup> This view arose as literacy grew after the invention of the printing press.

I want to suggest an inverse relationship exists between a religion’s focus on sacred, theological, and apologetic *texts*, and its capacity to put us into strong experiential *contact* with the immanent spiritual powers and deities of the world. Knowing takes many forms, and knowing the Earth, the elements, the animal, plant, and other powers, comes about by means other than philosophical argument, textual exegesis, and scientific investigation,. It cannot arise from reading *alone* not even from articles such as this.

When we immerse ourselves in a text we are immersed in a literate mode of awareness that speaks to our imagination, but simultaneously seals it off from other kinds of awareness and insight. We are certainly cut off from the kinds of awareness that arise from our immersion in Nature.

I think it is because of so often being text-bound that literate religions tend to emphasize the all-encompassing character of a deity or divine source or ground. I do not claim this dimension of the Sacred does not exist. Thousands of years of mystical experience suggests otherwise. I have had such experiences myself.

But *experiences* of this dimension of the sacred *also* honor the concrete. Yet when our understanding of this experience is cut off from its immanent dimension through being described in words that block ourselves off from the experience of sacred physicality and immanence, a deep gulf emerges between Earth and the sacred. With this alienation arises a vast loneliness and divide between human beings, the Earth, and the Sacred.

Here I believe is where Pagan spirituality can help heal the modern mind.

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<sup>37</sup> Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, p. 136.

## Spirit of Place

David Abram writes that when he returned from a year, spending time with Indonesian and Nepali shamans, his awareness had been transformed to the point that squirrels would come down from trees to chatter with him. He also wrote his connection with the other-than-human faded over time.<sup>38</sup> What Abram lost was a certain quality of awareness, a quality animals could detect. It was gradually replaced by one increasingly focused on the concerns of the modern world. Gradually he lost his ability to relate so clearly with the world of nature.

Terri Cotts, a meditation teacher, told me that several days into a month long Vipassana retreat she began having the same kinds of experiences Abram had reported. Cotts is a yoga and meditation instructor and this had been her second long retreat, so her experience is perhaps not the norm. But neither did she need to spend a year immersed in shamanic cultures. She also reported that after returning to the daily world, her new awareness gradually faded, as she could verify from animal's changing attitudes towards her, and the fading of auras she saw around trees.

Abram reported that if he spent extended time alone in nature and on Indian reservations his sense of connection with the other-than-human returned.<sup>39</sup> Like my friend's Vipassana retreat, the reconnection did not occur with a weekend hike. It took a immersion in the other-than-human long enough to still the internal verbal chatter so characteristic of the modern mind.

Many who have spent considerable time in nature, away from the telephones, books, televisions, and cell phones that continually reinforce our mind's the chatter, report a gradual shifting of awareness. Often initially accompanied by boredom, it does not end there. Given enough time, we attune to different rhythms making a profoundly healing transition, even when we might also look forward to returning to our daily lives.

How many people of all persuasions love getting out in nature as a means of putting their own problems "in perspective"? They accomplish this not by encountering people with bigger problems, (which also works but in a different way). They do so by encountering and being immersed in a particular quality or field of awareness, one we

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<sup>38</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, pp. 24-6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

often label as “beautiful,” “unspoiled,” “God’s country,” or “virgin” wilderness. Even if only briefly, they have immersed themselves in a field of awareness not polluted by human anger, ambition, greed, or fear. Their minds are cleansed. These can be an initial step to encountering sacredness in the world, experiencing its mystery as a Thou.

The usual explanation offered for these experiences is that we bring these values into the world. The world is a mirror, reflecting what we bring back to us. But this is not what we experience. When transfixed by nature’s beauty, how many people feel grateful to their own minds for creating their experience? Probably none. We experience *discovering* the view. It arrives as a *gift*, not as our creation.

Gary Snyder clarifies what is happening in such encounters: “The sum of a field’s forces becomes what we call very loosely the “spirit of the place.” To know the spirit of a place is to realize you are a part of a part and that the whole is made of parts, each of which is a whole.”<sup>40</sup>

Each component of a place contributes to what it is not only materially, but also energetically and psychically. But the whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is a gestalt, not only visually, but at every dimension, and it integrates more than we can explicitly know. The ultimate whole of which we are a part is the Sacred.

There is depth and mystery here, both frequently described in the literature of nature. In *A Sand County Almanac* Aldo Leopold wrote of the Rio Gavilan:<sup>41</sup>

The song of a river ordinarily means the tune that waters play on rock, root, and rapid. . . .

This song of the waters is audible to every ear, but there is other music in these hills, by no means audible to all. To hear even a few notes of it you must live here for a long time, and you must know the speech of hills and rivers. Then on a still night, when the campfire is low and the Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it – a vast pulsing harmony – its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the

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<sup>40</sup> Gary Snyder, *The Place, the Region and the Commons, The Practice of the Wild*, (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), p.38

<sup>41</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, (New York: Ballentine, 1966), p. 158.

lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries.

### **Ritual and Re-engaging With Nature**

No one became a friend simply by writing about the virtues and benefits of friendship. Friendship requires openness to the other in the moment. How to create that openness to the world, to encountering it and all within it as a Thou, is a major challenge confronting the modern world. Humankind's future may depend on it.

Many spiritual traditions enable members to bridge the gap between their daily awareness and this deeper awareness. They have developed means such as solitude, dreams, trance, fasting, and entheogens for detaching a person from their day to day preoccupations. All must be accompanied by clarity of purpose and focus, opening the mind to depths of perception, presence, and mystery to which it is normally blind.

Pagan ritual also offers people a way to shift their awareness into other realms. When well done, there is something about ritual that can carry even those who are simply present into direct contact with the numinous, including the powers of nature. Ritual is a powerful force for removing oneself from day to day awareness. But as David Spangler remarks, "Ritual can be meaningful only if it is mindfully done." This observation applies to performers and to those who are present. Spangler continues "Nothing is too ordinary to be sacred. Intention makes it sacred."<sup>42</sup> Here I would modify his statement: that it is the mindful intention of ritual that *opens us up* to sacredness that is already there.

Participation in ritual can build a Thou relationship with the Other-than and More-than-human. Ritual is a kind of etiquette, through which we can establish and participate in relationships with the More-than-human. I think the human mind is predisposed towards liking ritual, and participating within it. We have done it at least as long as there have been human beings, and possibly a great deal longer.<sup>43</sup>

For ritual to "work" those involved need to act mindfully. Reading from a script does not do because the reader remains immersed in daily awareness, an awareness

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Janice Van Cleve, *Boundaries: A Lecture by David Spangler*, <http://www.widdershins.org/vol5iss2/10.htm>

<sup>43</sup> Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), pp. 52-4.

reinforced by the printed word. Such rituals partake more of theater than connection. However, even here participants can benefit if their attention is appropriately focused.

Once connections with the More-than-human are made repeatedly, it can occur across a wider range of circumstances. But successfully opening oneself up to this kind of direct experience often requires intense and prolonged effort. With each connection, however, we are changed, “tuned” as a friend puts it, towards a clearer connection with the Sacred immanent in all things, and the Thou relations possible in the other-than-human world. The Presence that is in Nature is probably perceptible to most of us to some degree, but it becomes stronger as our experience of powerful ritual grows.<sup>44</sup>

To encounter the Goddess of Nature or the power of a mountain or the response of a desert wildflower when offered a pinch of tobacco in gratitude for my having photographed it, leaves us certain in a way no literary argument can that the world is sentient, and deeply so. I write this from my own experience.

Ritual marks the borderline between the contemporary institutionalized world of religious traditions and the practices of shamans entering into direct contact with the more-than-human. Pagan priests and priestesses practice along a continuum from those who possess shamanic gifts, to those who are passing on a tradition they have learned. True shamans will probably always be a minority because of the degree of commitment and time required to make these connections strong. These gifts are not free. But ritual can work powerfully, for those who are not shamans. So long as a tradition remains alive, their practitioners’ focus clear, rituals can open us to the Sacred.

The core of a true understanding of Nature and respect for Her is the capacity for entering into an I-Thou relationship with the other-than-human. This is not guaranteed by one’s being a Pagan nor is it closed to a non-Pagan. Martin Buber has been a guide throughout this work. I have written of my friend’s experience with Vipassana meditation. But a relationship with Spirit as immanent in the world is particularly harmonious with Pagan practice because our major focus is the Sacred as it manifests in the world, and Pagan ritual traditions have perfected ways of opening us up to it.

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<sup>44</sup> This raises the issue of how the realms of spirits and deities relates to the Source of all. Important as this issue is, I do not have space to examine it in this essay.

## Modernity and Nature

The dominant Western kind of awareness is probably incapable of sustaining a viable human relationship with the world because it objectifies everything. Modernity is unique in the depth of its objectification, universalizing to the entire world the despotic attitude that everything is an “it” serving as his or her “property.” The democratization of despotism is reflected in contemporary economic theory, and universalizing of science as the only road to knowledge.

The silver lining here is that universalizing despotic relations to the non-human *delegitimizes* their use between people. At the threshold of the human world we have drawn a cultural and psychological line. We know that people are resources, but also that they are not only resources. Modernity teaches us that anything into which we can enter a relationship is not properly simply a resource. Friendship can be a valuable resource, but friendship exists only when the relationship is not considered a resource by those involved. Friendship is a relation of *Thous*, and only from the outside, where its utility is visible but the rest of its meaning is not, can it appear to be a relationship of *Its*.

We need to be able to move from one kind of awareness to another, validating the truths in each. When we are in need our friends become vital resources of support, so in our physical need, our world becomes a vital resource for support. But this truth no more makes the world an object than our needs make our friends our tools. As Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday describes it, “You say I use the land, and I reply, yes it is true; but it is not the first truth. The first truth is that I love the land; I see that it is beautiful. I delight in it; I am alive in it.”<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

Momaday’s wisdom resolves one of today’s deepest environmental conflicts. On the one hand are those who regard the world as ultimately a source of resources for humanity’s use. Combining great physical power with great error, this kosmopathic attitude is headed for disaster. Many environmentalists draw an equally sharp line between humankind and the world we are despoiling. But we can no more avoid using

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<sup>45</sup> N. Scott Momaday, A First American Views His Land, *National Geographic*, July 1976, p. 18. Quoted in Hans Peter Duerr, *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 241-2.

and transforming our world than does the beaver whose ponds raise water tables, the buffalo whose herds helped maintain the eastern tall grass prairie, or the salmon whose bodies help make the forests of the North Pacific coast the marvel they are.

Wilderness is necessary both because it is vital that a kosmopathic civilization learn to acknowledge limits to its greed and because people must be able to find solitude when they seek it. But a true harmonization of humankind with the other lives and powers of this place requires us, like the beaver, the buffalo, and the salmon, to create greater beauty and abundance as a *result* of our actions rather than in spite of them.

Some cultures succeed in enriching the places wherein they dwell.<sup>46</sup> Ours will not until we see ourselves, as Aldo Leopold wisely put it, as “plain member and citizen” of our world rather than its self-proclaimed Lord on High.<sup>47</sup> Neither government nor economy, neither philosophy nor science can heal our perceptions and restore our sanity. But world affirming spiritualities can, and none more than a wise and deep practice of Paganism. Then, truly, we can say with Peter Forbes, “Our greatest achievement is not being able to say ‘we saved this place,’ but being able to say, instead, ‘you belong here.’ Land conservation can become the story of how the soul of the land became the soul of our culture, signaling over and over our place in the world.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cultures of Habitat: On Nature, Culture, and Story*, (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1997), pp. 153-165.

<sup>47</sup> Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 241.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Forbes, *The Great Remembering: Further Thoughts on Land, Soul, and Society*, (San Francisco: Trust for Public Land, 2001), p. 84.