

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

by John Seed

from THINKING LIKE A MOUNTAIN - TOWARDS A COUNCIL OF ALL BEINGS by **John Seed, Joanna Macy, Arne Naess & Pat Fleming**, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia, 1988

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"But the time is not a strong prison either. A little scraping of the walls of dishonest contractor's concrete Through a shower of chips and sand makes freedom. Shake the dust from your hair. This mountain sea-coast is real For it reaches out far into the past and future; It is part of the great and timeless excellence of things." (1)

"Anthropocentrism" or "homocentrism" means human chauvinism. Similar to sexism, but substitute "human race" for "man" and "all other species" for "woman". Human chauvinism, the idea that humans are the crown of creation, the source of all value, the measure of all things, is deeply embedded in our culture and consciousness.

"And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth , and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hands they are delivered".(2)

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When humans investigate and see through their layers of anthropocentric self-cherishing, a most profound change in consciousness begins to take place. Alienation subsides. The human is no longer an outsider, apart. Your humanness is

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then recognised as being merely the most recent stage of your existence, and as you stop identifying exclusively with this chapter, you start to get in touch with yourself as mammal, as vertebrate, as a species only recently emerged from the rainforest. As the fog of amnesia disperses, there is a transformation in your relationship to other species, and in your commitment to them. What is described here should not be seen as merely intellectual. The intellect is one entry point to the process outlined, and the easiest one to communicate.

For some people however, this change of perspective follows from actions on behalf of Mother Earth. "I am protecting the rainforest" develops to "I am part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking." What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. That is, the change is a spiritual one, thinking like a mountain (3), sometimes referred to as "deep ecology".

As your memory improves, as the implications of evolution and ecology are internalised and replace the outmoded anthropocentric structures in your mind, there is an identification with all life, Then follows the realization that the distinction between "life" and "lifeless" is a human construct. Every atom in this body existed before organic life emerged 4000 million years ago. Remember our childhood as minerals, as lava, as rocks? Rocks contain the potentiality to weave themselves into such stuff as this. We are the rocks dancing. Why do we look down on them with such a condescending air. It is they that are immortal part of us.
(4)

If we embark upon such an inner voyage, we may find, upon returning to present day consensus reality, that our actions on behalf of the environment are purified and strengthened by the experience. We have found here a level of our being

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that moth, rust, nuclear holocaust or destruction of the rainforest genepool do not corrupt. The commitment to save the world is not decreased by the new perspective, although the fear and anxiety which were part of our motivation start to dissipate and are replaced by a certain disinterestedness. We act because life is the only game in town, but actions from a disinterested, less attached consciousness may be more effective. Activists often don't have much time for meditation. The disinterested space we find here may be similar to meditation. Some teachers of meditation are embracing deep ecology (5) and vice versa(6).

Of all the species that have existed, it is estimated that less than one in a hundred exist today. The rest are extinct. As environment changes, any species that is unable to adapt, to change, to evolve, is extinguished. All evolution takes place in this fashion In this way an oxygen starved fish, ancestor of yours and mine, commenced to colonise the land. Threat of extinction is the potter's hand that molds all the forms of life. The human species is one of millions threatened by imminent extinction through nuclear war and other environmental changes. And while it is true that the "human nature" revealed by 12,000 years of written history does not offer much hope that we can change our warlike, greedy, ignorant ways, the vastly longer fossil history assures us that we CAN change. We ARE the fish, and the myriad other death-defying feats of flexibility which a study of evolution reveals to us. A certain confidence (in spite of our recent "humanity") is warranted. From this point of view, the threat of extinction appears as the invitation to change, to evolve. After a brief respite from the potter's hand, here we are back on the wheel again. The change that is required of us is not some new resistance to radiation, but a change in consciousness.

Deep ecology is the search for a viable consciousness.

Surely consciousness emerged and evolved according to the same laws as everything else. Molded by environmental

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pressures, the mind of our ancestors must time and again have been forced to transcend itself. To survive our current environmental pressures, we must consciously remember our evolutionary and ecological inheritance. We must learn to think like a mountain. If we are to be open to evolving a new consciousness, we must fully face up to our impending extinction (the ultimate environmental pressure). This means acknowledging that part of us which shies away from the truth, hides in intoxication or busyness from the despair of the human, whose 4000 million year race is run, whose organic life is a mere hair's breadth from finished. (7) A biocentric perspective, the realisation that rocks WILL dance, and that roots go deeper than 4000 million years, may give us the courage to face despair and break through to a more viable consciousness, one that is sustainable and in harmony with life again.

"Protecting something as wide as this planet is still an abstraction for many. Yet I see the day in our own lifetime that reverence for the natural systems - the oceans, the rainforests, the soil, the grasslands, and all other living things - will be so strong that no narrow ideology based upon politics or economics will overcome it". (8) Jerry Brown, Governor of California.

The term "deep ecology" was coined by the Norwegian professor of Philosophy and eco-activist Arne Naess, and has been taken up by academics and environmentalists in Europe, the US and Australia. **"The essence of deep ecology is to ask deeper questions... We ask which society, which education, which form of religion is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole."** (9)

Anyone interested in these or in connecting with the deep ecology network write to the Rainforest Information Centre, Box 368 LISMORE NSW 2480 AUSTRALIA.
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REFERENCES

(1) From the poem "A Little Scraping" the Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers, Random House, New York 1933 (out of print).

(2) Genesis 9;2

(3) "The forester ecologist Aldo Leopold underwent a dramatic conversion from the 'stewardship ' shallow ecology resource management mentality of man-over-nature to announce that humans should see themselves as 'plain members' of the biotic community. After the conversion, Leopold saw steadily, and with 'shining clarity' as he broke through the anthropocentric illusions of his time and began 'thinking like a mountain'." George Sessions "Spinoza, Perennial Philosophy and Deep Ecology" photostat, Sierra College, Rocklin California, 1979. See Aldo Leopold, "A Sand Country Almanac", O.U.P. London, 1949.

(4) Prominent physicists such as David Bohm ("Wholeness and the Implicate Order", Routledge, 1980), and biologists and philosophers such as Charles Birch and John Cobb Jr. ("The Liberation of Life" Cambridge, 1981) would agree with Alfred North Whitehead that 'a thoroughgoing evolutionary philosophy is inconsistent with materialism. The aboriginal stuff, or material from which a materialistic philosophy starts is incapable of evolution.' ("Science and the Modern World", Fontana, 1975 (first published 1926) p133). Similar views to those of these authors on the interpenetration of all "matter" (better conceived as "events") are developed in Fritjof Capra's "The Tao of Physics" (Fontana 1976) while the sixth century B.C. "Tao Te Ching" itself tells us that "Tao" or "the implicate order" as Bohm might say, "is the source of the ten thousand things" (trans. G. Feng and J. English, Vintage 1972).

(5) "For Dogen Zenji, the others who are 'none other than myself' include mountains, rivers, and the great earth. When

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one thinks like a mountain, one thinks also like the black bear, so that honey dribbles down your fur as you catch the bus to work." Robert Aitken Roshi, Zen Buddhist teacher, "Gandhi, Dogen and Deep ecology", Zero Magazine

(6) Theodore Roszak, for example, has written in "Person/Planet" (Victor Gollanz, 1979) " I sometimes think there could be no deeper criterion to measure our readiness for an economics of permanence than silence". Roszak has argued eloquently in another context that, if ecology is to work in the service of transforming consciousness, it will be because its students recognise the truth contained in a single line of poetry by Kathleen Raine; "It is not birds that speak, but men learn silence" ("Where the Wasteland Ends", Faber and Faber, 1974 p404).

(7) For the creative use of despair , see Joanna Macy, "Despair Work" Evolutionary Blues, Vol 1, No 1, 1981, PO Box 448 Arcata CA 95521 USA. For a long look at our impending extinction, see Jonathon Schell, "The Fate of the Earth", Pan Books, 1982.

(8) "Not Man Apart", Friends of the Earth newsletter, vol 9, no 9, Aug 1979. (9) Interview with Arne Naess by "The Ten Directions", Zen Centre of Los Angeles newsletter, Summer/Fall 1982.