

# MORNING EARTH

Yearning to be Round:

A Primer in Ecological Concepts in 16 Parts

## 9. Transformation in Human Life

Earlier, we described human beings as animals who specialize in being unspecialized. Our lack of specialization means that we have a lot of flexibility. We can change our behavior to accommodate new situations, so we adapt to change better than most organisms.

### Why We Are Born Helpless

To have flexible behavior, an animal must have the capability of learning. Human beings are large-brained: we can learn. To learn a lot, a young animal must have a long period of safe time to learn in. Human beings are born helpless, with our large brains only half developed. Human babies must have a long and protected developmental period (called childhood) in which to learn the strategies of flexible behavior.

We share much with the rest of Earth's life. But there are ways we are different from the rest. One way is that we have large and complex languages. Another difference is in the nature of our big brains, the ways we think.



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Almost alone among the animals we can imagine things that are not in front of us; and we can imagine futures that could be and futures that could never be; we can say "What if the sky were green?" Our minds can travel into the past with memory and into the future with imagination.

## Behavioral Adaptation And Culture

Our species, *Homo sapiens*, by using the gifts of language and a delayed maturity (a long childhood), has learned to substitute behavioral adaptation for physical adaptation. The sum total of these behavioral adaptations is known as human culture. Culture is a general term which means:

- the way of life of a human society
- the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group

In short, culture is what we humans in our various social groups, transmit and leave to our children. Our culture includes:

- our ideas and beliefs;
- our habits of relating to others;
- the physical or material things we leave to the next generations—such as CD and DVD disks, books, libraries, roads, buildings, and recipe books.

Each society and kind of society has a somewhat different culture. We can speak of American culture, French culture, German culture and so on. And we can speak of European cultures generally, which share a great deal—things like religion and world view.

Growing up is our time for learning our culture, of learning the possibilities and the boundaries of our own flexible behavior.

With luck, we learn strategies for living that worked well for thousands of years before us. Most of this learning is not taught—we just pick it up as we develop.

But some of our learning, such as what you are reading, is deliberately taught and deliberately learned.

The transformation our society seeks as children grow up is a gradual transformation from a helpless dependent to a self-supporting more-or-less autonomous adult.

- What transformations do human societies require of their members?
- How do human societies help their members transform?

These are large questions. and the answers are a little different for every human culture. We will focus on the answers that fit our American culture, though there is still more variety than we may think within our own society.

## **Transformation Into Life-Stages**

The most basic transformations required of all people are those related to growing up and maturing. We discussed in a previous reading the difficulty American culture has with aging.

In traditional (pre-literate) cultures, we re-define ourselves as we grow older, and move through various life-stages.

An infant becomes a girl becomes a maiden becomes a mother becomes an elder (wise woman).

Or, an infant becomes a boy becomes a warrior becomes a father becomes an elder (wise man).

One common comment on American culture is that we insist that our developmental transformations stop with, for males, the warrior role, and for girls, the maiden/virgin role—in other words, we make it hard for people to grow up all the way, we make it hard for people to become fully adult.

Tribal peoples always have rites of passage, which are ceremonies which transform young people into adults, often at puberty. You are either one or the other; either you have passed your initiation or you have not. Youth frustration and violence in our culture is sometimes blamed on our lack of clear social ways for young people to enter adulthood.

## **Play as Transformation**

When we are kids we learn to temporarily transform into Others when we play. Sometimes we become Moms, sometimes Dads, sometimes bears or mice, sometimes Monsters, and often Heroes.

Taking on roles like this—Pretending we have transformed—is one of the main ways we develop a sense of self.

This kind of play often extends throughout our lives, although as we get older we tend to hide it. Daydreaming often involves transformations.

We also transform at times into our earlier selves. This is called regression. There are times when some of us become infantile and throw tantrums. This is usually regarded as a bad thing.

But regressing to a simpler self, a more gentle and tender self—a child-like rather than a child-ish self—can help us be healthy. Being properly held by a loved one, for example, can help us transform into that childlike self.

## Identification As Transformation

One especially important kind of temporary transformation takes place when we are responding to dramatic art or stories.

When we read a book, or see a movie, or watch an especially engaging TV show, we often identify with a character in that work of art. For a time, we become those characters, and weep with them and rejoice with them.

One result of Identification is **Catharsis**.

This happens when we identify with a Tragic Hero. In drama, onstage or on screen, the Tragic Hero always ends up falling from his or her eminence and often dies. This moves the audience to feel terror and pity and be cleansed of those feelings by experiencing them through the imagination.

## Transforming By Belonging

There is a final kind of cultural transformation we want to draw your attention to. This is the kind of transformation that happens to us when we belong to things larger than ourselves.

We are highly social beings; we need each other, and we often enjoy being in close groups. When we are isolated, we sometimes die from it.

The worst punishment prison has to offer is solitary confinement. The worst

social or religious community's punishment is shunning or banning and exile.

To be denied social interaction is a devastating thing for most human beings.

We are individuals, but we are born to belong.

We belong to friendships, we belong to families, sports teams, choirs, churches, committees and political affiliations.

These things we belong to are all larger than one person. We call this kind of belonging transpersonal process: from trans (beyond) personal (individual), or beyond the individual.

If you have sung in a choir, there may be a shining moment in your memory when for a time all your voices blended into one, and you became a single wholeness that went beyond your personal selves.

If you have played on a fortunate sports team, you may have experienced a stretch of several minutes of rapid action in which everyone on the team played beautifully and could do no wrong. It was as if the team had become one organism, one being.

Or this same feeling may occur when you are part of a sandbag crew during a flood.

These moments of belonging are precious to us. They enlarge us and make us feel complete and whole.

from *Leaves of Grass*

*There was a child went forth every day,*

*And the first object he looked upon, that object he became,  
And that object became part of him for the day  
or a certain part of the day,  
Or for many years or stretching cycles of years.  
The early lilacs became part of this child,  
And grass and white and red morning-glories,  
and white and red clover, and the song of the phoebe-bird,  
And the third-month lambs and the sow's  
pink-faint litter, and the mare's foal, and the cow's calf*

—Walt  
Whitman

## Moving From self to SELF

Another powerful way that people report this intensity of belonging, and a overwhelming sense of wholeness, is when they suddenly become aware of being connected to every other living being, of being thoroughly and wonderfully connected to the entire living Earth.

As poet William Stafford says of such a moment, experienced at his family's farm:

***It was all the clods at once become  
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,  
and the windmill, my hands, the crack  
Arlie made in the axe handle: oh, let me stay  
here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all.***

He ends his poem with this realization:

***the world speaks.  
The world speaks everything to us.***

Poet Mary Oliver captures this sense of connection in another way:

***Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.***

Men and women have forever sought the sense of wholeness that rises from the experienced connection to the whole of Life, and the recognition that you are part of this truly enormous Whole.

In the 16th century, philosopher Baruch Spinoza argued that :

**...the highest end to which humans can aspire is  
knowledge of the union existing between the mind and  
the whole of nature.**

The ancient Hindu spiritual poem the Bhagavad Gita had this to say over two thousand years ago:

*They live in wisdom  
who see themselves in all,  
and all in them.*

The wise Mohandas Gandhi of India said this of his belief in Oneness:

***The ocean is comprised of drops of water; each drop is an entity and yet it is a part of the whole; 'the one and the many.' In this ocean of life, we are little drops. My doctrine means that I must identify myself with life, with everything that lives...***

Many people who work in environmental education believe that the best hope for long-term human survival lies in this process of Identifying with the whole Earth.

One goal of Morning Earth is to give you the background in ecology (that is, how the Earth works as a whole system) that might help you to experience that sense of belonging to the Whole of Life.

### **Some Sources for Transformation in Human Life**

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Oliver, Mary, *New and Selected Poems*  
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