Earthrise: Decoding the Speech of the Planet

Preliminary Research Report

Craig Chalquist - OPUS Archives

The following excerpt sums up what I planned to track in the archives:

> If Earth were a sentient non-human being trying to speak to us, how would we decode the message?
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> As the paradigm of modernity—a "Big Machine" worldview of reality as subject to linear operations of interlocking parts—continues to give way to a more comprehensive, systemic, "Deep Web" understanding of the cosmos as alive and participatory, forms of knowledge abandoned by modernity rise to the surface once again. One of these is a view of the world as animated, sensitive, and reactive, a pre-industrial view held by all our indigenous ancestors and by certain later alchemists, naturalists, and poets uninvested in mining and consuming a world of supposedly dead matter.
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> This essay proposes to "listen in" on the depths of nature by combining what Goethe developed as an "exact sensorial imagination" with depth-psychological methods of symbol amplification. This allows us to interpret natural events like storms and earthquakes as meaningful symbols: non-verbal, imagistic words in the vocabulary of animate Earth.

It became apparent fairly quickly that Joseph Campbell, Adolf Portmann, James Hillman, and Jane Hollister Wheelwright were the scholars with interesting things to say about decoding this earthly language, as the following quotations from archival material emphasize:

> We spend years in learning a human language--can it surprise us that we are very slow in penetrating the language of living forms?
> —Adolf Portmann (1954, p. 353)

> ...What we have here is a de-sacralization of the natural world and natural man....a season of some 3,000 years of institutionalized violence against Nature. Yet it has never totally triumphed. Nature comes breaking through, creatively, all the time.

> —Joseph Campbell interviewed by Costis Ballas (Joseph Campbell Collection, 1985, p. 3)

> If the world is not satisfied by our going through it, no matter how much beauty and pleasure our souls may receive from it, then we live in its vale without love.
> —James Hillman (2006, p. 74).

> I finally reached the realization that the Divinity still needing human recognition is our own planet earth in our solar system. It is the universe that humans have taken over for their own use which needs recognition from them.
> —Jane Hollister Wheelwright (1991, p. B-1).

I also drew on work by Jung, including the newly published Red Book (2009) and its remarkably prescient predictions about our collectively troubled relationship with the natural world.

To begin with Wheelwright:

Jane Hollister Wheelwright was among the first analysts trained personally by Jung. When her training ended she moved back to her family ranch in Santa Barbara County, California, and spent the rest of her life there. Out of many seasons spent watching and listening to the play of natural cycles and forces across the ranch came two books and the as-yet unpublished "Tepitates" journal. Tepitates, the name of her ranch, is Chumash for "sacred place."

While other Jungian analysts wrote about nature and place primarily as sites of human projection, Wheelwright employed an imaginative and heart-based double listening: to natural events (for example, to the earthquakes, tornados, and other disasters which remind us that we are not all-powerful), and to messages from the deepest layers of the psyche: fantasies, synchronicities, and dreams she came to recognize as, at bottom, the speech of nature too. By participating more consciously in natural cycles, and by protecting the earthly places we love, humans "find their rightful place in relation to the planet" (1991, p. 32). Many would see this sort of listening and living as a regressive return to the womb of Eden, but it actually involves a move of maturation from the culturally sanctioned fantasy of omnipotent independence to intelligent, adult-level interdependency. "We can't go back to nature," noted Joseph Campbell, "any more than one can be a virgin once again, but we can put ourselves in accord with nature" and be restored (Miodini, 1986, p. 36).

My work on "the new mythos for our time" follows from a hint by Joseph Campbell, who at the end of his life was asked by Bill Moyers whether the (at that time) new image of Earth

photographed from space might inspire new myths. Campbell replied that it might, although myths are no more predictable than dreams. However,

> ...The only myth that is going to be worth thinking about in the immediate future is one that is talking about the planet, not the city, not these people, but the planet, and everybody on it....When you see the earth from the moon, you don't see any divisions there of nations or states. This might be the symbol, really, for the new mythology to come. That is the country that we are going to be celebrating (Campbell & Moyers, 1991, p. 41).

Although Campbell believed that no single myth could contain human experience gone planetary (Keen, 1971, p. 35), here he seems to have meant a new mythos for our time: not a single mythic telling, but an underlying meta-story to furnish collective psychic structure for "how to relate this society to the world of nature and the cosmos."

My work with terrapsychology, the study of our deep relations with the presence of the animate Earth (Chalquist, 2007), has led me to the idea that this new mythos would have to involve a capacity for listening deeply to the "speech" of nature, place, and planet. Specifically, the natural world and the human unconscious speak the same symbolic language.

To hear this language requires us first to resurrect an assumption made by pre-industrial people around the world: that the planet below and around us is sentient. This is not the same as attributing human consciousness to rocks and trees. Rather, it means that living systems show a capacity for experience and interaction from top to bottom. Human consciousness is but one refinement of a more generalized dimension of the awareness of things. Thinkers who have taken this idea seriously include Pythagoras (according to Cicero), Heraclitus (according to Diogenes Laertius), Thales ("all things are full of gods"), Empedocles, Plato (in his image of anima mundi), Plotinus, Paracelsus, Gottfried Leibniz, Baruch Spinoza, Wolfgang Goethe, Marsilio Ficino, Giordano Bruno, Denis Diderot, Arthur Schopenhauer, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Friedrich Schelling, Margaret Cavendish, William James, John Dewey, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Peter Ouspensky, Wilhelm Reich, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead, William Montague, and, more recently, Rupert Sheldrake, David Ray Griffin, Christian de Quincey, Freya Mathews, Galen Strawson, David Abram, Tim Sprigge, Susan Armstrong-Buck, J. O'Brien, Stephanie Lahar, Val Plumwood, David Skrbina (2005), and of course Jung.

Alchemists sought for millennia to reveal the aliveness hiding within matter. One was Paracelsus, who called this principle of aliveness the Archaeus. Arche, a root of “archaeus” as well as of “archetype,” was for ancient Greek thinkers the first principle of nature, animating the cosmos and providing the substance and potency from which the gods arose. Kepler linked the Archaus with the anima terrae, the soul of Earth (Pauli, 1955). C.G. Jung connected mana, an indigenous expression of matter’s energetic aliveness and spiritual power, to the ancient belief in a spirit of place on the one hand--a belief found in every culture at every time, even ours--and to modern notions of psychic energy on the other (Jung, 1970).

Scientists who favor a “panpsychist” view of nature include biologist Pierre-Louis Maupertuis, Joseph Priestley (discoverer of oxygen), William Herschel (discoverer of Uranus), Nicolas Copernicus, Ernst Mach (magnetism), Emil du Bois-Reymond (nerve conduction), inventor Thomas Edison, astronomer Sir Arthur Eddington, evolutionary biologist Sir Julian Huxley, biologist J.B.S. Haldane, physicist Sir James Jeans, physiologist Sir Charles Scott Sherrington, biologist W.E. Agar, systems biologist C.H. Waddington, physicist A. Cochran, physicist Freeman Dyson, anesthesiologist Stuart Hameroff, and physicist David Bohm.

Naming the self-redesign of living systems autopoesis, Maturana and Varela (1991) chart cognition all the way down to the most primitive sensorimotor interactions with an environment. According to biologist Martin Heisenberg, even fruit flies, bacteria, and molds exhibit behavioral output independent of sensory input, indicating self-direction and self-initiated behavior (2009). In 2010, a study led by James Collins, professor of biomedical engineering at Boston University, found that bacteria resistant to antibiotics sacrifice themselves by producing indole, a chemical that supports the weaker members of the bacterial group (Lee, H. et al, 2010).

In the archives I came across a reference in Wolfgang Pauli to Johannes Kepler, the astronomer and mathematician who described the orbits of planets around the sun, regarded Earth as ensouled (anima terrae), with grass and trees for hair, sulphur for excrement, and rainwater and springs for sweat and urine; flooding meant that the planetary soul was ill (Pauli, 1955).

Caught up in a mechanistic worldview referred to by Jung’s Red Book as “the spirit of this time” (2009), most evolutionary biologists insist that evolution exhibits adaptation rather than progress. Even so, as systems of life evolve, some of them attain increasingly complex capabilities for the expression of consciousness. Zoologist Adolf Portmann believed that, similar

to great works of human art, the surfaces of animal bodies possessed a representational value beyond natural selection. Whereas internal organs tend to be similar within a species, visible organs--a particular zebra's stripes, the curve of a particular antelope's horns, the shape of a particular goat's beard--communicate an animal's essence, style, or inwardness beyond what purely empirical considerations can detect (1954, 353-54).

Recent research on animals reveals a wealth of social, cultural, and psychological behavior: rats who feel empathy, whales who collectively elaborate symphony-length songs, dogs who warn their humans of imminent mishaps, even elephants and ravens that mourn the death of loved ones (Bekoff, 2007). Chimps teach each other sign language. Dolphins, elephants, and gorillas recognize themselves in a mirror. If we gaze into the mirror they hold up for us, do we behold only what is strange and alien? Or might we discern signs hinting at a common language of symbols arising from the body and mind of Earth?

Having summarized his thoughts about animal forms, Portmann wrote about discovering in nature the possibilities of an "underlying order":

> They are clearly revealed when we study the supraindividual complex of relations that unites natural forms, constructed to be perceived, with the structure of the perceiving organ--that, for instance, integrates into a higher unity the color of a flower, its shape, and the eye that perceives them. In ever increasing measure, the living forms of our earthly flora and fauna bear witness to the existence of mysterious laws, to forms not directly accessible to us, and to their modes of action (1954, p. 369).

Sounding a bit like an alchemist of old, Portmann then suggested that the study of myths and symbols and unconscious dream life might be fruitful for revealing this wider system.

Depth psychologists have realized that what we know as conscious mental life, with its concepts and abstractions, chatter and theory, rests on a layer of mostly unconscious fantasy, image, metaphor, and motif: a poetic basis of mind, as Hillman (1975) puts it. This imaginal dimension received abundant description by Plato and Neoplatonism, William Blake, Avicenna, Marsilio Ficino, Giambattista Vico, Henri Corbin, Gaston Bachelard, Gilbert Durand, and Jung, among many others throughout cultural history (Hillman, 1983). Like phenomenology, depth inquiry starts from inside consciousness, the origin of all our perceptions and speculations, instead of reducing it to something less than itself.

Other fields that explore the symbolic and metaphoric structure of mind include somatic psychology, with its sensitivity to the meaning of how the body presents itself (see how your shoulders and back feel the next time you are emotionally overburdened), and the cognitive linguistic work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, who find evidence that "higher" faculties like human reason are built out of basic metaphors rooted in the body and its sense of its surroundings:

> As human beings, we have no special access to any form of purely objective or transcendent reason. We must necessarily use common human cognitive and neural mechanisms....We use a reason shaped by the body, a cognitive unconscious to which we have no direct access, and metaphorical thought of which we are largely unaware (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 7).

Ultimately, however, the archetypal structuring patterns of consciousness recall those of the natural world.

Students of permaculture, the nature-mimicking design of sustainable human habitations, are asked to look around for recurrent patterns and shapes. Finding curves, edges, meanders, spirals, branches, and nets below, above, and around us, we think about what these do--nets to structure and enclose, meanders to distribute flow, branches to channel and spread, spirals to cycle, gather, and refine--while marveling at Nature's ingenuity in building up a cosmos out of such simple forms that form the subtext of the indigenous sense of place (Abram, 1997).

Born from this ingenuity, we can reflect on its economy of expression: globes and veins outside as well as inside; the word "dendrite" refers to "tree." Grown over the trunk of the brainstem over evolutionary time, our cerebral hemispheres have branched steadily upward, layering and laminating like a Montezuma Cypress or a head of broccoli or brain coral. Jung:

> The psyche, if you understand it as a phenomenon occurring in living bodies, is a quality of matter, just as our body consists of matter. We discover that this matter has another aspect, namely, a psychic aspect. It is simply the world seen from within (1977, p. 303).

Jung's conception of how archetypes originate and operate underwent a long cycle of refinement—the alchemists would have said circulatio—throughout his life. In his early writings he speculated that recurring patterns such as the Hero/Heroine, Death, Resurrection, and Spirit represented nature's imprints on the collective mind, as when the daily rise and setting of the sun

translates over millions of years into a psychic emblem of birth, youth, and death (Jung, 1969a, 153). In his middle period Jung wrote about archetypes in more humanized terms (King Queen, Warring Brothers, etc.), a practice carried to extremes in the archetypalization of everything from Advertisements to Zylophones in the hands of pop Jungians; but in later works Jung again linked archetypes to natural forces. One example is Aion, where he discusses the mineral and vegetative levels of the Self and compares the perpetual evolution of archetypal motifs to the self-rejuvenation of the sun's carbon-nitrogen cycle (Jung, 1969b, p. 260).

A more personal side of Jung's connection to the natural world emerges in the Red Book, a remarkable tale of vivid inner transformation:

> But I was no longer the man I had been, for a strange being grew through me. This was a laughing being of the forest, a leaf green daimon, a forest goblin and prankster, who lived alone in the forest and was itself a greening tree....I had absorbed the life of both my friends; a green tree grew from the ruins of the temple...(2009, p. 276).
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> I talk with trees and the forest wildlife, and the stones show me the way.... (p. 277).

Astonishing ecological revelations recur throughout the Red Book, some of them brought by Philemon, Jung's Wise Old Man-within:

> What did they do with the admirable tree? What happened to the sacred frog? Did they see his golden eye? ...Did they do penance for the sacred ore that they dug up from the belly of the earth? No, they named, weighed, numbered, and apportioned all things. They did whatever pleased them...Yet the time has come when things speak (p. 352).

Or as James Hillman would put it:

> The world, because of its breakdown, is entering a new moment of consciousness: by drawing attention to itself by means of its symptoms, it is becoming aware of itself as a psychic reality (Hillman, 1981, p. 97).

With the evidence of breakdown all around us as debts drawn down too long simultaneously come due, Campbell hints at the kind of consciousness in which the dualisms that have bred dissension, disease, and ecological destruction melt down:

> With our view of earthrise, we could see that the earth and the heavens were no longer divided but that the earth is in the heavens. There is no division and all the theological notions based on the distinction between the heavens and the earth collapse with that realization. There is a unity in the universe and a unity in our own experience ("Earthrise," 1979, p. 56).

What if we decided instead to explore the possibility of subjectivity pulsing everywhere, flashing forth in a code we can decipher and receive? "We have nothing to lose but our mind-body problem" (Griffin, 1998, p. 91.)--and a worldview that even in breakdown enables displacement and destruction while isolating human selfhood from its original source of apprehension. By contrast, "Natural objects should be sought and investigated," wrote Goethe, "as they are and not to suit observers, but respectfully as if they were divine beings" (Matthaei, 1971, 57).

Listening in on nature, place, matter, and Earth with an ear tuned by Jungian amplification and Goethean phenomenology invites new possibilities for homecoming and relationship with the ensouled world that evolved us.

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