Unlearning

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We were hiking in the Hoh Rainforest, in Olympic National Park (WA, USA) – a landscape of green-on-green, nurse trees, ferns, strewn tree trunks and overlapping life. My then seven-year-old daughter and I sat down on a moss-cushioned log for a sip of water. We both noticed, just a few feet away, in a shaft of sunlight, a spherical swarm of gnats. "Mommy!" she said, "what are they saying?"

My first thought was: *They're not saying anything; they're swarming*. But I stopped myself. *Of course they are saying something!* I tried to answer with the same sense of wonder: "I don't know what they are saying, but they are certainly saying something, aren't they? What could it be?" We thought about it, as we sat there within the lush forest. We had ideas. We certainly didn't get close to finding out, but we both became more aware that these were small beings, we had more closely entered into their existence, which made them part of ours, and we were left with the curiosity of wanting to know more. The tiny insects, in the shaft of sunlight, had something to say that related to everything around us.

When did I unlearn this?

Maybe it had to do with becoming an adult, learning the language of my culture – a culture that does not really wonder what the gnats are saying.

Thirty years after sitting on that green log with my daughter, I now have a granddaughter. About the time she turned two, I had been reading David Abram – coiner of the term "the more-than-human world" (in Abram, 1996) – who writes: "For most traditionally oral, indigenous cultures that we know of, any and *every* phenomenon is potentially animate; everything moves. All things are felt to have their own pulse, their own inner spontaneity or dynamism" (Abram, 2018).

I realized that my granddaughter seemed to make no distinction between animate and inanimate objects. She hugged stuffed animals, pumpkins and

pine cones almost as passionately as she hugged me. She clutched sticks as though they were treasures. She said goodbye to rocks. She looked at everything. She cared about everything. She had conversations (presumably one-sided, but perhaps not) with rabbits and robins.

Now that she is three, she doesn't do that anymore. Why? We seem to take for granted that as children mature, they learn more about reality. But what if, in addition to learning, they are also *unlearning*? Are we encouraging a less imaginative relationship with the more-than-human world, less attentiveness to the fullness of the natural history around them? What would happen if we didn't overlay our present world view and culture on what may be an innate reality, and instead embraced the ecocentric world view that some cultures maintain?

How we interpret the world affects our relationship with it, and what happens to it. If life on Earth, the soils, the air, the water, are so interdependent that we need to recognize them all to keep our planet healthy, as some now believe (Cryer *et al.*, 2017), it may make more sense to talk to rocks and robins than not. We may need to know what the gnats are saying.

Though we cannot ever fully know what they are saying without *being* them, we can try to put ourselves into their lives, rather than merely observing them. In the Hoh Wilderness, my daughter and I tried to get closer, just for a few minutes. She didn't say *What are they doing?* Easy: they are swarming in the sun. She asked *What are they saying?* Harder: to answer requires a deeper attentiveness, a curiosity and a concentrated infusion of wonder. It requires a reaching outside of ourselves into other lives. It requires our imagination. As soon as we know that, those other lives become more real to us, they become important and we begin to care.

This may be essential to protecting the world of which we are a part. The news cycle, not to mention the weather outside our doors, is telling us that for all the supposed 'progress' we have made, it hasn't been enough, and we are out of time.

I work with a small land trust which protects land – farms, creeks, and woodlands – in one county in Pennsylvania, USA. The land trust movement could be described as a little like a tree itself: small organizations, like roots, preserving locally important places, protecting community resources – but feeding the successively larger organizations – the canopy – with on-the-ground work. These larger organizations have regional or global goals and the capacity to do more major projects. And they, like the sun on leaves, feed back to us nourishment we need – the science, the expertise, the legal assistance, the partnerships – that helps energize our work, connect us to the larger landscape. We know that our county line means nothing to the Appalachian Mountain chain or the Susquehanna River. But we also know that every drop of water in our county flows to that river, and that every stream, every swale, no matter how small, affects it. The larger organizations are protecting entire life systems; we are helping to add the puzzle pieces.

Just this month – a full thirty years after that conversation with my daughter – while preparing a webinar, I caught myself listing carbon sequestration,

wildlife habitat, agriculture and economic value, recreation and functional landscapes as reasons to preserve land. These are all valid. But as I reviewed this list, my eyes glazed over. These aren't the deep and overarching reasons – the *why* – we preserve land. While it sounded authentic, I had forgotten about the gnats. I had forgotten to say that everything has something to say and that we need to be listening. I had forgotten to emphasize that we are not separate from our environment – instead, I was talking about nature as if it were a *thing*.

I caught myself in time, just as I did those thirty years ago in the Hoh: I changed my message to say that people protect their land because they love it; because they know, deep down, it is part of them and they are part of it. I changed my language, turning it toward the more-than-human world. I talked about the emotional connection, and that it should not be ignored, that it was just as important as the scientific reasons, because that emotional connection translates to wonder, to belonging – and to the acknowledgement of interdependence.

Years have passed without my doing this – without my organization doing this. Even though landowners have told us that preserving their land is "the best thing they ever did"; even though one landowner told us his ground was sacred; even though they love the wildlife that shares their land.

There's a reason that those of us in conservation haven't talked much about emotions, connections or the concept that the world is all one interwoven entity. It's because 'tree-huggers' were not listened to – ignored, deprecated – and we wanted to get things done. We try to appeal to those who oppose our efforts, by giving them things they can't argue with – like the fact that it costs more to build stormwater facilities than it does to preserve stream banks. But this language still promotes *us* as the most important. We avoid asking people to face the threatening thought that humans may not be the most important beings on Earth. Our governments exercise the right of eminent domain for power lines, for roadbeds and for gas lines. But what of migration corridors, waterway protection or critical wildlife habitat? What of the delicate ecological webs that sustain all life on Earth? What of a recognition of the value of non-human life?

Ironically, though we justify our work in the languages of science and economics, we attract our donors with stories of the land, with natural history experiences, with wildlife and scenery – with the very personal *why*. We take them on walks and they donate. They see an oriole for the first time, and they gasp with joy – and will always want the orioles to have a home. The scientific information does focus our work – it is a tool – but the *why* we do it is much larger, and requires getting outside, learning the land, offering and exalting that experience and sharing it. The tool is not the endgame. The people who support us know this, as do our landowners. And it's why we do it, too, that's the big secret. We really *are* tree-huggers. The time – if there is enough of it left – has come to bravely embrace a message that can save us.

In an excerpt from his new book, *The Boy in the Box*, published in this journal, Derrick Jensen (2023) writes that "there are no personal solutions to social

problems". I think I understand what he means – that 'reduce, reuse and recycle' is not going to save us; that small personal changes are not enough. But he also says "unless it's stopped, this culture will kill everything on the planet" – and then he asks instead: "What are the largest, most pressing problems you can help to solve using the talents that are unique to you in all the universe?"

For many of us, changing our world view and our language, and exerting peer pressure might be the best answer to that question. I believe that the only way to achieve cultural change *is* peer pressure; *is* personal – the messages from each of us as individuals and also from conservation organizations like mine. Conservation organizations are made up of individuals, but they can also generate new thought processes. Policy makers often do what their constituents want. We constituents must want an ecocentric world view. We must learn to care what *all* of the beings of the world are saying. As daunting a task as it may seem to foster critical change, I believe that high-level policy decisions will be based on what individual constituents let be known that they want. It will take significant peer pressure to encourage us all to listen, and for those in power to see us doing so. It has to come from each of us. Maybe Jensen is saying the same thing.

Peer pressure can indeed be powerful. For example, researchers asked four groups of utility customers to cut energy consumption, each for a different reason – the good of the planet, the well-being of future generations, the financial savings or because their neighbours were doing it. By comparing meter readings, it was determined that only the last message had any effect – a ten per cent drop in consumption (Conniff, 2009).

Tipping points can happen (Loeffelholz, 2020), and we need one, because our culture has to change overnight if we are to avoid catastrophe. One component of culture is its trends, such as what imparts status. For example, why, in the USA, are there 40 million acres of lawn (Son, 2020) instead of wildlife habitat? Because these tended green expanses were once a sign of wealth; an outdated European fashion – but a trend that has changed the face of a continental landscape, one person's yard at a time.

So here's my personal plan: from this point forward I should ask of every decision I make: How does this nurture life? How does it respect, protect and love the beings with whom we share this Earth? Every word that I utter can be an expression of how I connect with the world. I must share my imagination and my experiences, and must confess my deep love for our whole Earth. I must undergo a personal cultural shift.

Even that small change I made with my webinar could make a difference. I'm changing as I write this. If we openly recognize the beings around us, we will more closely enter into their existence, which makes them part of ours, and we will want to know more. Our whole sense of belonging will change. Our communications will reflect this mindset. Maybe opening the door is just a matter of… opening the door. Natural history is the universe having a conversation with itself. Maybe we can come back in.

A generation has passed since I sat with my daughter on the green log. Now I am being retaught by my granddaughter. When she was two-and-a-half, she

laid on the floor, put a basket on her back and informed me "I'm a turtle!" I responded "Yes, you are!"

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