

8

Rules for Behaving Well in the Society of Being

103

“Animism is about what it means to be alive in the world.”

Tim Ingold

This essay has started as an attempt to show how important animistic practices and beliefs are for a practice of sustainability that overcomes the traumatic heritage it stems from. The essay then has unfolded into an argument for self-decolonisation. I propose self-decolonisation as the first requirement to understand those cultures that have never truly stepped out of the experience that the cosmos is a vast collective engaged in nurturing aliveness. I hold that nurturing aliveness – one’s own and that of the others, which, if done with the innocent intent of providing nourishment, is indistinguishable (Weber 2017) – is the most important step towards a different ecological practice. In this chapter I will make some practical suggestions about how to interact with the persons that constitute an ecosystem (a local commons of reality).

Interacting with non-human persons is not a technical procedure. It is not about learning the right skills from indigenous societies, albeit those skills often require a particular attitude, and therefore acquiring them can lead to nurturing one’s aliveness. What we need in order to nurture life (the own and that of others) is animistic practice. I say this with the same emphasis as the Buddhist who calls what he does not “worship”, but practice. And as Buddhist teacher Dōgen reminds us: “When you find your place where you are,

practice occurs” (quoted according to Snyder 1990:27). It is likely helpful if we understand the technology implicated in the management of indigenous commons, but alone it will never get to the point. In the hands of the westerner, this knowledge will become just another technical means, a tool in treating the world as an object. The first step, however, is precisely to stop treating the world as an object, but to approach it as a personal other instead, a “thou”. If we are open to communicate with gratitude and the pledge for reciprocity, everything is already there, and not much more is needed. For this is what the reality is about: Communicating in reciprocity.

I remember attending a workshop on the ontologies of the commons, which went for several-days. International experts were invited, and there was even a small minority stemming from indigenous backgrounds, and from countries in which this is background is still present as part of everyday experience. There was much talk about ontologies. But the only ontology present was the western conviction that the best approach to the world is to observe its building blocks, construct hypotheses, discuss them, and thereby try to smash competing hypotheses. The participants talked and some of them tried very hard to be right in order to trump the other’s arguments and prevail.

A change only came when the group decided to hold a session in the presence of the local river, a beautiful, although visibly suffering body of water, flowing in sight of the workshop venue, but not visited by any participant before. The simple act of asking to be received, and of promising to provide fecundity, with the water at our feet murmuring a continuous answer of invitation, did everything to change the course of the talk. It was then that I understood that in order to be truly helpful to the non-human persons with whom we share our breath, we do not need to struggle over better theory (and over who wins). We need to ask for permission to

enter into the commons of mutual nurturing again, and we need to pledge to give back. We need to truly do this, with our voice, and our skin.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013:183) has given a remarkable account of the attitude, which is needed in order to achieve this reconnection. It is not about technique, or skills, or the right requisites. It is about real care, care on the heart level, of truly seeing the (non-human) others with whom we share. It is about taking reciprocity seriously, as Kimmerer suggests: “Know the ways of the ones who take care of you so that you can take care of them.” Kimmerer calls the attitude to approach others in order to ask them to share their world with us the “Honorable Harvest”. She has developed the according set of rules particularly for the situation of humans “taking” from the natural world, for food or for clothing. But the “Honorable Harvest” is a guide to any form of relationship with non-human (and human!) others. Its “ancient rule is not just to take only what you need, but to take only that which is given” (Kimmerer 2013:184). The principles of the “Honorable Harvest” are:

*Introduce yourself.
Be accountable as the one
who comes asking for life.*

*Ask permission before
taking. Abide by the answer*

*Never take the first. Never
take the last.*

Take only what you need.

Take only that which is given.

*Never take more than half.
Leave some for others.*

*Harvest in a way that
minimises harm.*

*Use it respectfully. Never
waste what you have taken.*

*Give thanks for what you
have been given.*

*Give thanks for what you
have been given.*

*Give a gift in reciprocity for
what you have taken.*

*Sustain the ones who sus-
tain you and the earth will
last forever.*

(Kimmerer 2013:183)

These principles are to be taken seriously. This is the animistic requirement. We need to comply to them literally. “Introduce yourself” means “say the truth about who you are”. Say it. Speak. Communicate. Talk in front of a tree. Introduce yourself in the presence of a twig full of cherries. “Be accountable” means “really do grasp that you are in a relationship in which your actions affect a sentient person”. And so on down on the list.

For the western mind, and particularly for academic thought, this is a near-to impossible task. (At least in a professional setting. It may happen everyday with one’s pet animal or within the own garden). This is so, because the practice of reciprocity as taught by Kimmerer very much relies on our embodied experience sensing the reality of other, human and non-human, persons. The attitude of the “Honorable Harvest” presupposes that we are indeed able to communicate as part of the wider collective of life, and that we need to do so in order to nurture this collective. The communication, which makes this possible, comes first. To communicate –

to present yourself and to be receptive – is more important than a sophisticated plan what to do, or a technical manual, and it is vastly better than to teach others.

If we build on the insights of modern biosemiotics, if we trace back the connections, which psychologically and physiologically link us to a meshwork of bodies with whom we share one life, this insistence on true communication with other beings does not need to seem so out of the ordinary. In the terminology of western philosophy, the attitude, which underlies this sort of relating is called “Panpsychism” (Mathews 2003, 2009). Panpsychism argues that every material process from a different perspective is a subjective experience.

Panpsychism is on the rise in mainstream philosophical discussion. For a long time, it had a hard time among a mainstream science denying any ontological subjectivity and determined to do away with feeling. While debating is the according practice for a dualistic metaphysical approach (talking about), feeling is the necessary means for a panpsychistic worldview (feeling with). Allowing ourselves to feel is the requirement for communication with non-human persons, for listening to them and asking to be heard by them. Feeling communication is at the same time precisely what needs to be achieved by our self-decolonisation. These are not magic skills out of reach for an ordinary western human. To the contrary: We are practising feeling all the time, as we are alive and cannot help to be.

Standing in the presence of a flowering rose and feeling – even inexplicably – drawn towards it, feeling compelled to become active and productive in the presence of its beauty already is a deep communication. So observes nature educator Barry Patterson (2005:136): “A communication with a tree is first and foremost a feeling in your body.” Many of our western practices in the minor sciences of art and poetic understanding are communications with the collective of

the other-than-human world. For a member of an indigenous society the experience of awe and beauty in the presence of “nature” certainly is communication. The others speak to us through our feelings.

So there is a lot of exchange with other persons already going on in our daily lives. We only need to make it explicit, and we need to rescue this experience from the disqualification as “private anecdotes” and the estrangement of being seen as “aesthetic perceptions” only, as mere re-enactments of memes from cultural history. If the others are kin, being welcomed by them instills in us the feeling of being nurtured by family. What the west calls the experience of beauty hence in depth might be the realisation to be kin. It might be the experience to be looked at, to be called, the invitation by this kin to partake, and to nurture back with one’s own capacity to give life (Weber in Van Horn, Kimmerer & Hausdoerffer, forthcoming). We should never underestimate the degree to which an other looks at us while we observe her or him. We should never misunderstand a sensuous contact with otherness as a purely causal event of “having a sensory perception”.

The other persons being present in the collective of life communicate their presence, and they give back our gaze, or even return it before we have started to properly watch. The meshwork of bodies sharing breath, as animism holds and everyday involvement confirms, lives through inner experience and the encounter of other person’s inner experiences as much as it does through material exchange. Everything we encounter on the material plane is also a communication on the animate plane. Every sensuous happenstance is as well a dialogue between beings. This dialogue happens very much on a bodily level, as for example the dialogue between our liver and our red blood cells. But it is nonetheless not machine-like and “purely physiological”, to the contrary.

As the liver-erythrocyte-dialogue is providing us with life,

and any disturbance in their communication is potentially life-threatening, their body-talk is present to us as our inner experience, and mood. It is expressed in a language that is difficult to translate in words. But it is nonetheless expressed in an idiom that we understand, because it is the conversation that we are ourselves. It is the communicative process that brings us forth and connects us to all other persons that are equally linked to physiologies and matters of exchange (as in the water or carbon cycle). We converse in a language that is not unknown to us. It is only unknown to our conscious use of reason, which privileges thinking over perceiving. But all is said, although we might need a moment to translate.

Take this moment and look into the trees with their branches moving slowly, and then more quickly, and then slowly again with the wind. And then imagine that everything outward is an expression of the collective of being that nurtures us, and that asks to be nurtured back. Every whisper of the leaves brings its inwardness with it, every gust of wind is from a world, which does not differentiate between mind (us) and body (them), but is both always. And then maybe for a short moment you can perceive that the wind is the breath of someone, and that it meets you as another someone. Imagine that the trees swaying in the breeze, the foliage moving strongly here, only slightly there, then stirring in a soft wave of air, and then calming down again, are actually one being moving and breathing, and expressing her presence.

Cultural anthropologist and ecophilosopher David Abram has developed this experience into a theory of the ubiquitous animistic spirits as the “Invisibles”, as the sensuous excitement we feel when in touch with the collective of other life. Abram (2013:132) says: “The spirits are not intangible; they are not of another world. They are the way the local earth speaks when we step back inside this world.” Then it is less difficult to know that we are addressed, although it remains difficult to discern the meaning of it. Abram goes on: “By speaking

of the invisibles not as random ephemera, nor as determinate forces, but as mysterious and efficacious powers that are sometimes felt in our vicinity, we loosen our capacity for intuition and empathetic discernment.” This is the sort of experience, which lays the track for a proper communication with the other beings present in the local collective of life.

Here is not the place for a presentation of different practices of communication with those “Invisibles”, with the persons populating the “more-than-human-world” (Abram 1996). Two things are important to mention, though: First, reconnecting to the living world can be done by everyone. It does not require expert knowledge, as it builds on our own inborn practical capabilities to be alive and to nurture life-giving relationships, and to feel if those relationships are providing nourishment. It builds on our capacity to be true to ourselves, and true to others, and to really wish to provide for reciprocity. In the worlds of sustainability activist and mentor Elizabeth Ferguson “so much of it is simply knowing the world to be alive and feeling and to experience great gratitude and relationship to it” (Elizabeth Ferguson, personal communication). The heart leads, not the adherence to any techniques or schools.

Second, westerners need the guidance by indigenous people. Westerners need to be humble. They need to be willing to learn and to unlearn. They need to be willing to truly do the work of transformation in order to work away the trauma. They need to accept that what is necessary is the readiness to not prevail as a protected ego, but to allow this ego to dissolve into the family of being and then from there be born again. Fecundity comes first. The other comes first.

Here is a proposal of what to do before any activity takes place at any given location. It is simple, but if taken seriously, can establish a basic openness for communication. Everything else will come from there.

Arrive. Don't get busy immediately. Don't cater to your needs first. Go ask what is the need here.

Walk around without aim. Let yourself be drawn by your intuition to where you are called.

Be attentive. Where is North, where is South? Where is the wind coming from? What birds are singing? What sounds are around?

Listen for the spirit of the place. Try to sense its mood – the atmosphere of the location. Try to feel what it needs.

At the place where you feel called to (where you feel best, actually), rest, and ask for reception. Use simple words and speak in a normal way.

Pledge to work in favour of fecundity. Pledge reciprocity. Pledge that your work here will be a gift to this place and to all its beings.

Breathe. Perceive. Sense. Listen to answers with all senses and all of your capacities to receive: Think, perceive, feel and intuit.

Take only what is given.

Think of what you can offer. Tell what you can offer (“Spontaneity. Precision. Perseverance. Grace”. Or what is your strength, and your love?)

Leave a gift.

Start your work.