

Heal our Selves, Heal the Earth

An essay by Helen Moore, 2003

"The myriad differences resolved by sitting, all doors opened.
In this still place I follow my nature, be what it may.
From the one hundred flowers I wander freely,
The soaring cliff – my hall of meditation
(With the moon emerged, my mind is motionless)."
Reizan No Tsuki (tr. Lucien Stryk)

If we were to map out Western thought as if for geological study, it is my opinion that we would see it straddling a fault line, which has characterised our culture for perhaps a thousand years. Dualism is a familiar concept to us, but the degree to which it permeates our thought is astonishing. The dyad groups are numerous and familiar: Good/Evil, Light/Dark, Spirit/Body, Masculine/Feminine, Civilisation/Primitivity, Self/Other; but I believe that in recent history the latter dyad has especially shaped the minds of Western intellectuals. Culturally this has been manifest in our attitudes towards other human beings, towards Nature and even towards our own bodies.¹ However, through my own often painful journey to heal myself, a young Western woman, I believe that in order to create the sea-change in attitudes necessary to halt our species-wide path to self-destruction, we need to look to ourselves first and foremost, to integrate Self – body, mind, spirit. Then, in healing ourselves, we will find it natural to want to heal the sense of alterity underpinning our harmful relationship with our planet Earth.

Much of the critical theory in which a great deal of intellectual and academic thought is based, lies in this dualism of Self and Other. French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan cites it as part of the child's development, at what he calls 'the mirror stage', when an infant is first able to recognise him- or herself as Other than his or her mother. This stage of separation I perceive to be correctly described, for up until that point the child is completely identified with the breast and the benign maternal smile upon which he or she is so dependent. However, I sense that culturally and socially we have become arrested at this infant stage of development. Certainly Lacanian thought perpetuates this Self/Other framework through the stages of identity formation, while throughout the West our cult of individualism shapes an attitude that re-enforces a focus on Self in its uniqueness and individuality. This is in stark contrast with Other, whom we either try to appropriate into Sameness or whom we reject – except when Other mirrors our idiosyncrasies. Only then do we embrace the people in whom we recognise ourselves as kith or kin.

The leading French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, nonetheless writes of the importance of 'Approaching the Other as Other'. For her this is a way of resisting our urge to appropriate, to make the Same. She writes: "I would say that the other, the other as other, remains beyond all that we can predicate of him or her. The other is never this or that that we attribute to him or her. It is insofar as the other escapes all judgement on our part that he or she emerges as you, always other and non-appropriable by I." In these words lies some wisdom. Certainly it is important to

¹ Susan Griffin discusses our 'Split Culture' in depth in her essay of the same title in *Healing the Wounds – the Promise of Ecofeminism*

respect difference, to honour, value and celebrate it – human diversity is after all a reflection of the Earth’s bio-diversity, I believe. Yet at the same time I fear that in insisting on alterity, Irigaray overlooks our basic humanity, the needs and qualities that human beings share the world over. Here, echoing in my ears are Primo Levi’s words in ‘If This is a Man’:

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find, returning in the evening,
Hot food and friendly faces:
Consider if this is a man
Who works in the mud
Who does not know peace
Who fights for a scrap of bread
Who dies because of a yes or no.
Consider if this is a woman,
Without hair and without name
With no more strength to remember,
Her eyes empty and her womb cold
Like a frog in winter.”

A sense of Sameness is therefore vital to ensure basic humanitarianism. But the Self/Other paradigm is deeply ingrained in our ways of perceiving the world and perhaps most dangerously of all, it affects our self-perception. For unlike many Eastern cultures, where there is an understanding of the subtle flows of ‘chi’ or ‘prana’ through the body and the different energetic centres distributed throughout (for example, the chakra system), in the West today we see our minds as the sole centres of consciousness. In this way, our ‘Self’ consciousness cuts us off from our bodies, which thus take on the Otherness of our dominant paradigm. This makes us susceptible to the onslaughts of Capitalism, our economic practices feeding parasitically on the Achilles heel we feel around our diverse sexualities, weight, body shapes etc. It achieves this largely by holding up an ideal norm to which to aspire - or, if you like, an Other than who we really are.

The unsurprising result of our sense of bodily alterity is that numerous people in the West are now suffering from what has now been recognised as Body Dysmorphia Disorder (BDD) – an abnormal preoccupation with a perceived defect in one’s appearance. In ‘the whole woman’ Germaine Greer writes: “What is truly depressing about the false dawn of feminism is that, as we have been congratulating ourselves on largely imaginary victories, BDD has become a global pandemic.” Even worse is the fact that with it come numerous related complaints and psychologically-induced diseases, as well as ever-increasing rates of invasive surgery - hysterectomy, Caesarean sections, cosmetic surgery to name but a few.

Body is of course Matter, which I feel to be infused with Spirit. But for the dominant culture, which has done away with all mysticism, it seems obvious that this Self/Other relationship we have developed with our bodies should also be extended to another aspect of the material plane - as we now perceive it - the Earth. Christianity has, I believe, contributed to this relationship, with its reverence for the heavenly Sky Father and its debasement, to just an aspect of God, of what in many spiritual traditions would be an equally revered Earth Mother - an animate being with a soul. Instead Christians

have made the Earth a part of His creation – and worse, I think, the part over which God grants Man dominion. Tragically this has led to our civilisation's greedy obsession with extracting every last ounce of mineral wealth from Mother Earth's rocks, clear-felling Her forests and ignorantly using every last 'resource' we can lay our hands on in order to further our mortal plans and enterprises.

Nonetheless, and despite terrible persecution (mostly of country women and men practising their knowledge of herbs and healing), the pagan reverence of the Earth survived for centuries in strongholds in remote corners of Britain and Ireland. Rites for dressing holy wells and Beltane fires celebrating the Earth's fertility are traditions surviving to living memory in the Highland regions of Scotland. Yet today's mainstream culture has almost entirely repressed the remembrance of this aspect of our cultural heritage, although it lingers in our fascination for witches and magic (cf. the phenomenal success of Harry Potter.) Instead, our conquering spirit is writ large in so much of our art and Media. Adverts show cars conquering the elements, while in recent years I've noticed a preponderance of vehicles, in particular SUV's, with names suggestive of this conquering attitude: Defender, Crusader and lately Touareg – a belittling appropriation from the nomadic North African desert people.

Christian orthodoxy is, however, not alone in underpinning this Self/Other attitude characteristic of the West. Central to our culture and market economy is the Darwinian notion of Survival of the Fittest. It justifies our sense of ourselves as the most successful species on the planet, with Nature an aggressive Other against which we need to war - an attitude exemplified in Tennyson's much-quoted "Nature red in tooth and claw." However, Darwin had warned his contemporaries against misreading Origin of the Species, since there was another strand to his theory which discussed the importance of co-operation in a species' success. Nonetheless, Charles Darwin was a man of his time, a fact Karl Marx astutely noticed, remarking on the extent to which Darwinian thought was influenced by the social mores of the age. In a letter to Engels in 1862 he writes: "It is remarkable how Darwin recognises among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, 'inventions' and the Malthusian 'struggle for existence.'"² But it was left to Kropotkin, in his magnificent study Mutual Aid, published in 1898, to correct the imbalance left by a skewed reading of Darwin - although this work seems to languish in the backwaters of academic study.

Historically Darwinism has, I believe, thus also reinforced a dualistic world-view that has dangerously justified the West's sense of its 'fitness' over and above other human beings. Colonialism was of course based in a sense of white supremacy and racial and cultural Otherness have created modern horrors: segregation in North America, the Holocaust, South African apartheid, ethnic cleansing in Europe and Africa. Even today it continues today in different guises – in Northern neo-imperialism and globalisation, which completely depend on exploiting a poor South, or in George Bush's desire to make anyone who does not support his policies Other – namely a terrorist. In fact, sexism, ageism and all discriminatory practices that fail to see a basic humanity or sentience in Other (which is Sameness) are attributable to it, while beyond homo sapiens' cruelty to itself, the Self/Other dichotomy perpetuates vivisection and numerous other cruelties to animals.

² See Hilary Rose's essay 'Colonising the Social Sciences?' in *Alas Poor Darwin*, Vintage, 2001

Often the sense of repugnant Other has been an expression of what Carl Jung called our 'shadow', where we deny and repress those aspects of ourselves that we dislike, then often projecting their qualities onto others. A prime example is the way our colonising ancestors looked in horror at those aspects of the 'Savage' that their civilised culture rejected, whilst simultaneously failing to see in those indigenous peoples a mirror of their own savagely repressed nature that had once felt our deep interconnectivity with the Earth.

Aspects of the Western counter-culture do attempt to readdress this. A modern pagan chant goes: "Earth my body, water my blood, air my breath and fire my spirit" - simple words to remind us of what we still so easily forget. Of course our traditional funeral rites tells us: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes", but perhaps because it's invisible or even somehow unpalatable to contemplate, many Westerners somehow overlook the fact that we all breathe the same air. Perhaps we also forget how completely we depend on green plants for creating a gaseous atmosphere that enables us to survive? Or that our bodies are approximately seventy percent water – the Earth's surface sharing a similar compositional percentage? At the same time I hear from at least two friends of mine, who work with adults and young people from deprived urban communities, that they often educate their clients about the source of food - for despite contrary appearances, factories process and package raw ingredients emanating from the Earth!

Astonishing though it seems, these kinds of widespread lacunae in our understanding represent our systematic denial of our Sameness with the Earth. Nonetheless, Science - despite its own struggles with the dominant paradigm - has shown us how similar our genetic make-up is to other species, while pioneering scientists have demonstrated the effect of the observer on the observed – showing that the division between Self and Other is deeply blurred. For me it has also been exciting to see how quantum physics can now theoretically explain the energy flow through matter, which up till now has always been the preserve of Eastern mystical and esoteric knowledge – the work of Fritjof Capra in particular making this complex field accessible to non-scientists.

Yet sometimes it seems that these insights are just drops in the ocean and still we require the wake-up calls that Nature provides – often brutally – to force us to think outside the box of our paradigm. James Lovelock's Gaia Theory has famously described the Earth's ultimate resilience to human encroachments, but I think we would do well to translate this recognition into our very cores, for it emerges not just in the unrestrainable power of the elements – cyclones, volcanoes, ice ages, forest fires – but in subtle, invisible ways too: namely the shape-shifting abilities of viruses. For just as our hubris leads us to believe we've reached an age that is somehow no longer susceptible to the kind of terrible epidemics that raged in history, we see others appearing, often as a direct result of our behaviour. For me, Foot and Mouth and Asian Bird Flu have been just two stark examples of what happens when we think we can greedily control food production by feeding animals on waste matter and keeping them in deadly conditions that become breeding grounds for disease.

It's also important to remember that our sense of separation from Nature does not just affect us at the level of biology and mechanics. Making Nature Other also affects our psyches, since our whole being is nurtured by experiences of being at one with the land; when this is absent neuroses and depression set in. Watching a fat bumble bee busily collecting the pollen of a purple thistle-head; being transported by a stunning sunset

over the sea, a beautiful star- or moon-lit night, or meditating outdoors are all experiences which, like starving children, our souls cry out for. Since who can deny that in being at one with Nature, we experience transcendental moments that fill us with ecstasy and merge us with the divinity that is in Nature and in us all? And though it may be argued that in watching that bee or contemplating the sea we delight in Otherness, surely our observations should simultaneously stir us with a sense of Sameness – for don't we describe busy people as bees or find ourselves washed by a sea of emotions? And don't indigenous peoples draw on the strengths and qualities of animals in order to make themselves better hunters or to have gentler hearts?

This sense of sameness, I believe, needs gently to blend with our sense of alterity in order for us to heal the chasm across which we otherwise stand. It needs to stand in a beautiful balance of paradox, the kind that the Zen Buddhists delighted to write in their koans. And by embracing wholeness - integrating within our psyches light with dark, good with evil, masculine with feminine, the civilised with the primitive - I believe we can prevent the destructive projection of our shadow sides onto Other. If we do this, I have faith that then no longer will our society tolerate wars, exploitation or social and environmental injustice and at the same time we will come to heal both our Selves and our lovely planet Earth.

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