

A Feeling for the Whole

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We were recently watching an animation by Drew Berry which glimpses, in wonderful detail, the processes of replicating and transcribing DNA. It's as if you had a microscope capable of magnifying ten million times. Seeing the rhythmic choreography of molecules dancing together their life stories, is breath taking. At one point the commentator says that this process is taking place, right now, in nearly every cell of your body! Later, after watching the DVD, Mary and I were out walking when I was flooded with the recognition that this fantastically rapid, complex thrumming of organic chemistry was taking place in each leaf, of each plant; stretching out as far as we could see, fields of living green; meadows and forests all around us, humming with the busyness of intelligence unfolding.

At the molecular level, the overall activity of a cell appears to be like an amazingly well organised city with countless components, each going about its life journey. It's as if everything knows exactly what to do, a staggering number of proteins and complexes of proteins, along with numerous other bio-chemical substances, constantly being formed and dismantled. Not only that, but each process of forming and un-forming is itself interacting with other transient forms in ways that give rise to yet other transient forms and so on. On the scale shown in Berry's DVD, our bodies would be the size and complexity of an entire planet! I find myself wondering if the organelles within the cell are aware of the cell as a whole, not to mention the animal or the plant of which they are a part? If so, what kind of awareness would this be?

Pursuing this idea a bit further, the other day I was looking into a hawksbeard, *crepis capillaris*. What's that, you might ask? It's a beautiful dandelion-like wildflower, so common here in New Zealand that it is usually ignored or just lumped into the category of 'weeds'. Our meadow is full of them. Looking closely into one compound sunburst flower head, I began to notice many micro insects crawling around, sensing, eating, finding mates, and generally being the immense mystery that they are. A bit later, I put one of these populated flower heads under a stereo microscope and, at about 85xs magnification, the micro insects were revealed to be tiny wasp-like creatures. One was busy cleaning its wings while another came by to check it out. Attached to various places on their black bodies were glistening grains of yellow pollen. If one of these insects was the size of a human, the pollen grains would be the size of basketballs!

Back in the field, I looked up and realised that I was surrounded by thousands of these flowers, all waving in the breeze. Each one a home for tiny insects that, with my unassisted eyes, looked like moving black dots. I wonder to what degree the individual insects are aware of the field of flowers or, for that matter, the specific flower head they are living in? I wonder in what way the molecular dances within individual cells of the insect are 'aware' of the insect? And yet everything, all these vastly different dimensions of being, intricately and beautifully fit together. They are necessary for each other. What we call 'life' is a seamless inter-becoming. A flowing stream of myriad ephemerality.

Let's consider me, looking into this particular flower and this particular population of insects. We could wonder to what degree Tarchin is aware of the entire meadow in which he is sitting. Would such an experience even be possible? And what about the protein synthesis going on inside me as I write these words – synthesis whose very existence powers and gives form to the movements of my fingers on the keyboard; reverberating symphonies of neural-muscular knowing, broadcasting throughout my entire being? Could the molecular components be aware of me or the meadow I'm sitting in? And in what way is the meadow and the surrounding water catchment area aware of the molecular components? The question is perhaps unanswerable yet these realms are all affecting each other. They are flowing through each other; responding, shifting and changing in perfect accord.

In today's human world, there seems to be a compulsion to grapple with larger and larger realms of experience. It's as if the slogan, "bigger is better", has been so collectively internalised that we unconsciously assume it to be a fundamental truth of nature. Many people are passionate about saving the planet, saving cultures, saving species, or ecosystems. This is a wonderful phenomena. At the same time though, it seems to be part of a great ignorance-making project. By wrestling with a really large, generalised realm of life, we tend to blank out the specific details of myriad other dimensions and realms of being. We are often so focused on the 'big' issues that we fail to see the blades of grass bending under our feet.

I think we humans have become 'dimension chauvinists'! The dictionary defines chauvinism as; "excessive or prejudiced loyalty or support for one's own cause, group, or gender". It seems to be the nature of chauvinism to not only identify with and protect particular views or opinions, but to simultaneously diminish, devalue or simply ignore other views. Due to education, or social conditioning or religious beliefs or just plain unconscious need, we experience a very limited part of the world and think that our experience is all that matters. In terms of having a feeling for the whole, this largely innocent conceit has become a critical problem.

Our infatuation with large abstractions has shaped many areas of life such as economics, statistics, planning and management, and we then apply these abstractions in our attempts to understand ecologies, cultures, religious teachings, business and so forth. This obsession with the generalised large picture has contributed to incalculable suffering in the form of enforced standardization, and loss of diversity. We have somehow come to value the global and planetary above local. Local rarely seems profound. After all, it's just us and look at us, with all our foibles! What of value could we learn from our neighbours? On the other hand, overseas expertise, ancient knowledge, imported wisdom – ah that's worth spending money and energy on.

It seems that along with each realm of knowing or each dimension of being, goes a tendency to become oblivious to the component fields that collectively support that experience. Perhaps the very act of focusing on any single part of a whole is a form of abstraction. We abstract, or extract, or pluck a particular detail out of the vast flowing matrix of situations and circumstances. From this point of view we humans are surely lost in abstraction. Is this why the challenge of livelihood and how to live healthfully with each other seems so complex and difficult to resolve? Perhaps this tendency to not see the trees for the forest or the forest for the trees is an inherent characteristic of perception.

Many people feel that their bodies and social lives are 'real' but that the molecular level is merely conceptual and the wholeness of the biosphere is the business of eco-philosophers. Whichever realm of knowing we are engaged with, this engaging feels alive and meaningful while all the other supporting realms are seen as mechanical and less relevant. The field of experience I sense as 'me' is a living subject, and everything else is transformed into a less alive object. The fact that all these other living objects are experiencing themselves as a subject for whom I may be merely another object, rarely occurs to me. In Buddhism, this type of knowing is called *viññana*. It is a type of consciousness, that always arises in the form of a duality. On one side is the 'self' that knows. On the other is the entity or experience that is known. For most people, the experience of knower and know is so intuitively natural that we rarely give it a thought. Yet this dualism unwittingly supports the disastrous conceit of feeling more important than anything else. Our challenge is to operate in this *viññana* way of knowing while at the same time having a feeling or appreciation for the whole.

So many technologies such as the internet and cell phones reinforce our thinking and experiencing in abstract ways. We have become bamboozled by our own intelligence. Ironically, at the same time we develop the potential to operate, or at

least look into, many dimensions of space and time, we are losing the ability to value smallness and the local; what's next door, and immediate, and apparently ordinary.

Our deeply engrained tendency to compartmentalise often obscures the fact that all the different levels and realms of being are mutually interpenetrating. There is something flawed in our thinking to ignore or undervalue where we are, in order to be concerned about a grander picture somewhere else. What we do here affects the micro worlds. What we do here affects the macro worlds. It is right here that there is an opportunity to effectively engage. All other worries or concerns are just flutters of thinking. Salt and pepper condiments on the meat and potatoes of now.

Pause with me for a moment.

Feel your breathing and appreciate where you are.

Soften throughout your body.

Brighten your senses.

A beautiful, great, open,

multi-dimensional meadow of presence.

It's all around.

A seamless space of generous allowing and sharp discernment

Immediacy, exquisitely poised

unlocking the doorways of empathy

a feeling for the whole.

As I travel and teach in different places on this planet, I meet with many people who are questioning what to do about corporations, about pollution, about loss of diversity, about conceit and deceit in people exercising political and economic power. Here is a suggestion that is not often mentioned at rallies and protest meetings. I think we need to rediscover what it means to be both humble and engaged. We need to learn the art of living with sensitive awareness and a capacity for compassionate responsiveness. We need to reconnect with curiosity and wonderment. We need to refine our feeling for the whole and explore the organic roots and branches that make us trees in the forest of life and forests in the tree of life. Roots anchor us in a multi-dimensional ground; a living biosphere, a present fruition of myriad histories of co-evolving beings. Our strength, and nourishment comes from this ground. Branches divide again and again as possible

avenues of exploration and life involvement, each leading to different though related flowerings and fruit.

roots and branches
strength and indeterminacy.
a causal matrix being us
a vast array of possible actions
the further we trace them,
the more they ramify and branch
branch leading to branch,
root leading to root,
a filigree weaving of lives and beingness
solidly here

And so I come back to the meadow of hawksbeard. I come back to awareness. I come back to wonderment. I come back to a way of being that senses the whole of creation is alive. The great Hwa Yen and Kegon philosopher yogis of old glimpsed this vision of wholeness as have the mystic scientists of today. They spoke of worlds interpenetrating worlds without obstruction. This is a profound spiritual exploration. The ramifications of it are immense.

NOTES:

Drew Berry's DNA animations can be found in "DNA Interactive" which is available from <http://www.dnai.org> This is a superb 4 hour teaching DVD on many aspects of DNA research including interviews with key scientists such as Watson and Crick and many magnificent animations.