

Reflections: It's in our Nature

During my recent Vision Quest (1) on a mountain in the South of France, I was observing a tiny flower for a very long time. It appeared to me that everything in nature is giving the best of itself. Every life form in nature seems perfect. We humans, experience this natural perfection as beauty. I think this is because we are made out of the same "stuff" as nature. With stuff, I mean, both physical material and principles or energy. No wonder we can deeply connect with nature if we allow it and pay attention to it. Nature can touch us in the core of our soul. If we can silence our mind, nature talks to us, in a thunderstorm or a breeze.

It's in our nature to be deeply connected with nature and the intelligence of the earth.



How often do you touch the earth with your bare feet and body, feeling sand, grass, rocks with your skin? How much fresh air do you breathe every day, how often are you outdoors? For those of you who spend a lot of time in nature, what I write is a no-brainer. But today the way we live our contemporary urban lives, **even if we love nature, most of us see ourselves living an almost complete disconnect from the natural world.**

Office employees often spend hours in buildings where no window can be opened, sometimes even no natural daylight comes in. Research shows that the view of green surroundings and natural daylight are essential to one's health and mental abilities (2). Fresh air, daylight and trees are basics that hopefully are part of your urban lifestyle, but what about the following: How often do you drink water directly from a source? When was the last time you tended a fire (not a barbecue)? When was the last time you slept under the stars?

During more than 90% of our history as homo sapiens, nature was our home. We didn't have permanent stone houses, at most a shelter. A fire probably was more important to feel safe than a roof above our head. Fresh water was essential for survival. We share the largest part of our DNA with other mammals, and a big part even with plant life. **We are more similar to animals, other living creatures and nature than that we are different from them.**

C.G. Jung (3) asked the question: "Are we not the carriers of the entire history of mankind? When a man is fifty years old, only one part of his being has existed for half a century. The other half may be billions of years old."

This thinking is in line with the currently emerging paradigm of interconnectedness; he considered the capacity to identify with animals an innate instinct arising from our shared evolutionary heritage, the phylogenetic foundation of our species. *“Modern man has created an artificial boundary between humans and other life, a boundary not typically found among tribal peoples”*.

Also Y.N. Harari (4) (author of “Sapiens”) says in Homo Deus *“Of course evolution never stands still, and it has continued to modify humans and animals in the 12.000 years since the advent of farming. For example, humans in Europe and western Asia evolved the ability to digest cows’ milk, while cows lost their fear of humans, and today produce far more milk than their wild ancestors. Yet these are superficial alterations. The deep sensory and emotional structures of cows, pigs and humans alike haven’t changed much since the Stone Age.”*

Is it then that our current disconnection from natural life is like a collective birth trauma, having been taken away from our nourishing natural habitat, our home?

Urbanisation, traffic and our digitalised, online lifestyle have further accelerated this in the last few decades (5). Children play less outside than a generation ago. A lot of adults and children nowadays work, play and live for a considerable part of their time in a virtual digital world.

We are not only losing touch with nature, we are also losing touch with human connection and with “physicality”: we check the weather app to know if it’s raining instead of looking outside at the sky or going out to sense the temperature and humidity of the air. Experiencing the world through our senses is becoming the “cherry on the cake” and even the experience of those precious real live events, like the birth of your child, can be missed as people feel the urge to “record” them instead of living them. There is more at work here than the disconnection from nature alone of course. The stress and speed of living and working online, the economics we are entangled in are resulting in *a lot of people being chronically exhausted, unfulfilled, bored or sad hence the alarming numbers of burn- and bore-out.*

The good news is that the positive impact of nature on our health, wellbeing and happiness being recognised more and more (2). In Japan, the health benefits of “shinrin yoku” or “forest bathing” are promoted. Japanese researchers found that our immune cells increase in the forests. Neuroscientists in the UK and US have measured how people’s brains respond differently to different environments. Being outside in nature, even walking in a park, deactivates the frontal lobe and makes alpha waves grow stronger. Alpha waves indicate a calm but alert state that is also engaged in meditation or flow. In Finland, Public Health officials recommend citizens to get 5h/month minimum in the woods to prevent depression. In Singapore you cannot build a skyscraper anymore without incorporating greenery on the building itself.

We are trying to bring nature back into our urban life, we are going out to the woods more on a regular basis. In some countries this is not necessarily something everybody can afford... Going to a park is one thing, having access to a pristine wilderness place is something else.

What once was the simplest thing on earth - nature as our home - is not to be taken for granted anymore.



But there is more to nature than the physical and psychological health benefits that modern civilisation is beginning to recognise. **Retreating in nature has been practiced by many cultures and indigenous people as a rite-of-passage, and by shamans, druids, monks & prophets of all times and places as a powerful transformative ritual.**

To describe the rite-of-passage ceremonies of Native American cultures, 19th century anthropologists invented the word "vision quest". These rituals marking the passage of adolescents into adulthood were guided within the community and involved the "quester" spending time alone in nature in search of a vision. Nowadays a lot of organisations around the globe facilitate rite-of-passage programs such as vision quests (6). A vision quest consists of a preparation phase, 3 or 4 days & nights in nature alone without food, and a number of days of integration.

I have been on vision quests myself 3 times in the last 7 years. These 3 quests have been each very different but what they have brought me is the immense, pure and simple feeling of being home. These times of solitude in nature seem to have awakened in me a deep and ancient longing for connection with nature; I would even say that this longing is becoming stronger each time I go back. A vision quest or nature retreat is different every time and for every person, but **at the core of the experience is the magic of timelessness, silence and emptiness, the absence of distractions and comfort, the reviving of your sensory awareness, the interaction with all living creatures and elements around you: the trees, plants, birds and insects, the sun, the wind and the stars.**

The principles and laws of nature also drive us, humans. **Our bodies are similarly affected by the time-space dynamics affecting the earth: the seasons, the cardinal directions or gravity.** In his book "Earth-Based Psychology", Arnold Mindell (7) talks about a "quantum compass" that we humans share with the universe and the earth. It is the origin of our bodily sense of direction. Our time sense originally was connected to the environment; before we had clocks, we watched the position of the light and the stars. Humans still have an earth-based "sentient awareness", an ability of our bodies to sense directions. **Mindell describes sentient awareness - very much like the concept of the unconscious of C.G. Jung - as a subtle body feeling or sensation, precursor to awareness and consciousness, a nonverbal experience, that seems to "happen" to us, it feels like a kind of knowing and interconnectedness with all things.**



My experience with being in nature, disconnected from the internet, clocks, phones or books, is that we quickly regain our sentient body awareness. The voices in your mind stop chattering. The routines of having meals give way to the slow moving of the sun, the rhythm of day and night. This is when you become aware of what is around you. This is when you surrender to just being there, humble, not more than the flower you're sitting next to. **Then, dialogue with nature and all living beings around you starts happening. You experience nature as "animate", this means "alive" just in the same way as you are. Then, the natural world around you tells you stories, teaches you ancient wisdom, and teases you.**

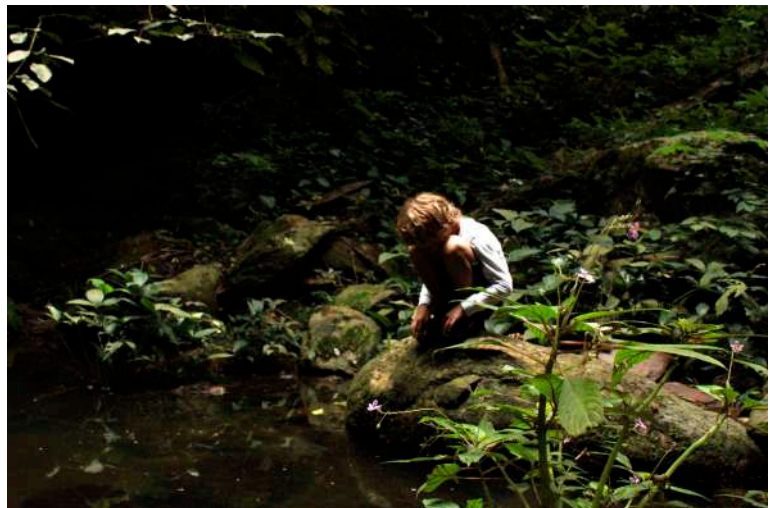
Nature is indeed more than our home and a source of energy, wellbeing and healing. The natural world is intelligent and sentient. On a pre-conscious instinctual level we can communicate with other life forms and with the earth herself. That's why nature can also be a mirror, a coach and a buddy in our journey during our lifetime. As Jung said "Nature is an incomparable guide if you know how to follow her" (3).

When we, humans, lost paradise in our development towards "conscious" individuals, and separated ourselves more and more from other animals and nature, we paid a high price. We lost our intimate connection with the earth and other living beings, we lost the feeling of unity and belonging and the ability to communicate with the natural world. But as Mindell writes: "Earth wisdom is deep and obvious. If you relate to the earth – if you sense its compass – you cannot be lost for long" (7).

What for indigenous people is a foundational assumption is becoming recognised nowadays based on quantum physics. Nature should be considered as a unity of matter or substance and spirit or energy. The origin of the word "matter" is the Latin word "mater" meaning mother, origin, source, and its declination "material" meaning substance.

I personally like this quote of Jung very much, not only because I believe today we have to reconnect with "matter", meaning the natural physical reality, but also because of the freshness and timelessness of his words:

"When today we talk of "matter", we describe its physical properties. We conduct laboratory experiments to demonstrate some of its aspects. But the word "matter" remains a dry, inhuman, and purely intellectual concept, without any psychic significance for us. How different was the former image of matter – the Great Mother – that could encompass and express the profound emotional meaning of Great Mother."



And this is why I started organising Nature Retreats: for people who sometimes had very little earth-connection left, for rational entrepreneurs or people who had forgotten the wild child inside. I have seen all of them opening up as if a stream of fresh water had gone through them. People refilled with life energy from just a few days of reconnection with nature, ritual and silence. Some went through life-changing transformation and healing. The deeper we surrender to the messages from nature, the more courage is needed to accept all possible answers, also the ones we do not want to hear, the daemons we do not want to face. Every vision quest I have undertaken brought me clarity and simplicity. And every vision quest or nature retreat brought me home.

This brings me to the end of my reflections and my plea for taking time to re-connect with nature, the woods, wilderness. It is in our nature.

Chris Hoerée, August 2018
<https://earthways.be/retreats/>

Notes:

(1) A Vision Quest is a ritual known in many indigenous cultures where you retreat alone in nature for 3 or 4 days without distractions like books, pen & paper, food and only a bare minimum of shelter.

(2) *We are wired to be outside – Science is demonstrating what we intuitively know: Nature makes us happy.* By Simon Worrall in National Geographic February 12, 2017 <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/02/nature-fix-brain-happy-florence-williams/>

(3) *The Earth Has a Soul: C.G. Jung on Nature, Technology & Modern Life*, edited by Meredith Sabini, North Atlantic Books, 2002, 2005, 2008, 2016

(4) *Homo Deus, A Brief History of Tomorrow*, by Yuval Noah Harari, Vintage, London, 2017

(5) *Digiziek, pleidooi voor offline leven*, by Manfred Spitzer, Atlas Contact, 2016 (original title: Cyberkrank!)

(6) *For the last 30 years, the “School of Lost Borders” (CA, US) offers cross-cultural “Vision Fast” ceremonies for adolescents and adults. In the US, organisations often use different terms than vision quest in order to differentiate from, and show respect for the ceremonial practices of the Northern American indigenous peoples. Sometimes terms like Vision Fasts, Wilderness Quests, Wilderness Solos, Rites-of-Passage ceremonies, etc. ... are used.*

In Belgium where I live, several organisations (Anam Cara, Belgian School of Shamanism, Agape) facilitate Vision Quests, mostly based on shamanic principles.

(7) *Earth-Based Psychology: Path Awareness from the Teachings of Don Juan, Richard Feynman, and Lao Tse*, by Arnold Mindell, Lao Tse Press, 2007