



Chrysalis

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“I’ve learned that readiness to hear requires a long journey, much time. Our inner landscape must be opened. Cleared. Rearranged. So we can hear better...My loneliness of loss was altered into a solitude of presence to the ageless Silence. The ashes of my soul became a kind of soil in which new life formed, and for the first time, I became aware of myself as I really am. When I came out of the forest, I emerged as a man of solitude in kinship with all the life of Earth.”

Dear Reader,

These words, spoken by Jalam in the unpublished manuscript, *The Shepherd and the Prophet*, are words written by our sacred friend John Shackelton who crossed the threshold into “the Mystery” on July 19, 2022. When John sent me the manuscript in the mail in the fall of 2021, I felt that I was in the presence of a sacred work, almost autobiographical in nature, in which Jalam undergoes deep and gradual trials of transmutation from the intellect to “the profound and essential” – a journey through the dark depths where the intellect quiets itself in order to fully enter the Silence and listen.

Through this reflective story, the question of what it means to be human gradually unfolds not as a teaching, but rather as an inner attitude toward existence. Jalam’s story is a remembering, you could say, for humanity to break away from the mirage of illusion and rest, instead, in the deepest Presence within Silence as mystery. Jalam’s trials bring him to a place of *dwelling* ever more deeply in the interior strength and authenticity of his own being, even as he *indwells* more deeply with Earth. In the Silence lives the memory of the world. The journey feels like a re-humanization of what it means to be human.

This process of facing one’s own nature makes it possible to distinguish essence from illusion so that one becomes more aware of the sources of illusion and can hold them at bay. We enter a place of welcoming “not knowing,” which we see in Jalam’s own journey where he no longer has a ground upon which to stand; where he has an increasing capacity to bring himself to a state of quiet and stillness. Given that Mystery is betrayed if it is presented in cerebral ways of knowing, the mystery is



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communicated as a story “echoing here and inside him
from a larger Voice older than thought could reach.”

Jalam’s story is also an echoing of John Shackelton’s
own life, a life we have been so blessed to be a part
of since John found his way to the Center in 2006 as
a participant in our first “Inner Life of the Child in
Nature: Presence and Practice” program. During the
second year of the program, John birthed “Children
of the Mystery: Why We Need a Pedagogy of the
Sacred” that first appeared in our Spring 2008 issue
of *Chrysalis*¹ and later in *Only the Sacred: Transforming
Education in the Twenty-First Century*.²

John then served on our board, helped to form our
Educator Council and co-wrote, with John Sullivan,
our Board Wisdoms. You can hear John’s voice in
all contained within the Wisdoms document, like the
following:

“We make it our sacred intention to proceed
with a new type of respectful listening, to pause
with our questions and hold them without in-
sistence on a specific kind of answer, and wait.
This approach embraces our connection to the
larger locus of meaning and fosters a rever-
ence that is expressive of willingness to listen,
to hear and attend. Attention, as the mystic
Simone Weil reminds us, is a form of prayer,
and we feel that our life as a board should be
marked by such reverence.”

John’s journey continued with his essay, “Languages
Closer Than Words” in 2012, a piece that became
essential reading for the Inner Life program and
brought us into the presence of the Real:

“The Real touches you, perhaps in meditation,
perhaps as inner resonance with the landscape
or a tree or flowing stream, perhaps something
you see in the eyes of another person as you
sit over coffee in the city. In your receiving this

¹John Shackelton, “Children of the Mystery: Why We Need a Pedagogy of
the Sacred,” Illus. by Liz Levitt, *Chrysalis* (Volume 5, Spring 2008) 7-15.

²John Shackelton, “Children of the Mystery: Why We Need a Pedagogy of
the Sacred” in *Only the Sacred: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century*,
ed. Peggy Whalen-Levitt (Greensboro, NC: The Center for Education,
Imagination and the Natural World, 2011), 21-35.

touch, an insight appears, an image; a depth of recognition opens. You know what is happening because the familiar Voice of your Innermost has spoken before and emerges now from the mystery of your own being, rising into your awareness, not first of all to give you knowledge, but to know you. The touch is intimate, the communion such a wonder that words fail, and you find you have become still. In the stillness, a knowing stirs within you.”³

In 2015, John gave us the gift of his book, *Opening Forgotten Sanctuaries: Recognizing Education as Sacred Encounter* under the pseudonym Clay Lerner – an invitation to recognize the essence of our humanness in our Belonging to Earth in the lives of children in our care – that we published as part of our Emergence Series.

In May, I received an email from John saying that he had written a new piece that he would like to share with me. It came at a busy time in my life and I told him I looked forward to reading it when a space opened. Then, the first week of June in a brief phone conversation, John told me he had just learned that he had cancer and would be learning more about treatment soon. Holding John closely in my heart, I sat down with his essay, as if to be in conversation with my sacred friend and draw closer to him. I wrote back soon saying, “What I feel here is the deepest integration of what you have been conveying for so many years now,” and asking, “Would you consider allowing me to publish your essay in *Chrysalis* just as it is?” To which he replied the next day:

My dearest sacred friend,

I’ve been having a particularly difficult morning after a night of little sleep, and your Recognition brings tears of gratitude and fills my heart with the joy of *anam cara*. My pains lose significance now. What a wonder!

I would be honored for this offering to appear in *Chrysalis*. Very so.
Thank you so much for this blessing.

Love and inexpressible kinship,
John

So deeply honored are we, John, to print your essay here. Dear *anam cara*, you will be so deeply missed. You said shortly before your death, “I am held by the Mystery,” a knowing you have held throughout your life. With this anonymous verse, we pay homage to the beauty of your life:

Wisdom shines through you
Love glows in you,
Strength penetrates you,
Out of the depths of the world.

In you has arisen
An awakener of life,
A servant of holy things,
Selfless, and true.

³John Shackelton, “Languages Closer Than Words,” illus. by Liz Levitt and Ruth Shackelton, *Chrysalis* (Volume 9, Fall 2012), 4-13.



With gratitude,

Peggy Whalen-Levitt

Peggy Whalen-Levitt,
Director

Understanding Closer than Concepts

by

John Shackelton

Four years after the events of 2006 that I recorded in “Languages Closer than Words,”¹ I found myself wondering about our human capacity for concepts, for that orderly kind of thinking only we can do. Where does it Belong?

This seemed like an important question. Given our long history of the destructive use of this ability, could it be that Earth’s evolutionary Learning made a cosmically fatal mistake? And if not, then what happened to this gift? What do we not see? I remembered that in 2006, I was prevented from conceptualizing my experience in abstraction. Did that moment of Recognition of the knowing in a mountain and the concurrent constraint of the Silence rejecting words speak to my question? In a morning meditation, feeling held in the Silence, I asked.

Of course, the Mystery holding us would not explain itself; the Silence would not offer understanding of the manageable kind we prefer. Within the sacredness of our Belonging, an understanding of the human capacity for conceptualization would not arrive conceptually. The Living response to my question began, as Real answers always do, in stillness in the Silence, the intimate touch of an awareness that forms only there.

I was sitting on our porch that August Saturday morning in 2010, looking out at the density of woods behind our home. In the stillness of those moments, I felt Earth’s Life in me bodily, a physical sensation of relationship to all I beheld, to flowers newly blooming and trees older than I am (rather old, then). This echoed for me experiences in Ireland a month earlier where I had repeatedly felt Life rise up into my body from the earth beneath my feet. But now at home, the green of the trees in the light and shadow of early morning touched me, knew me into the intimacy of our Belonging. It was then, in the hush of this being-known, that the question formed in simpler words: *Where does conscious thought Belong?*

Then, from the engendering body-intimacy of the Natural World, a second Recognition: My wife Ruth and I were to return to Cashel Kilty the following summer (2011). This time, we were not invited to receive a gift but to be present in gratitude-of-reverence. We were to return to the place where I had been known into letting go of control-by-language. We were to be there in thankfulness-of-body, to present ourselves to Earth in that hollowed place.

¹ John Shackelton, “Languages Closer than Words” (*Chrysalis*, Fall 2012), 4-13.

June of 2011 found us on the Beara Peninsula on the coast of west Ireland, and we again hiked up to Cashel Kilty. It was again a rare Irish day—blue sky with wispy white clouds and a soft summer breeze. And I did not carry a notebook and pen.

Ruth and I stood together on the bluff, the precise spot where I had received the meditation stones in 2006. She stood to my left, our arms pressing against each other, facing east. There we acknowledged that we are not our own and offered thanksgiving for our Belonging to Earth. Then we “formally” offered body thankfulness—presented ourselves bodily, in totality, to Earth to be known into participation in the mystery of our humanness for the rest of our life journey.

It was a “moment” of utter simplicity, a graced absence of personal ambition, of spiritual objectives—no request to be initiated into lofty mysteries, no pursuit of transcendent escape from the limitations of body and time. No agenda at all. We had been graced to offer *body* thankfulness in awareness of not-knowing.

The answer to the question, *Where does conscious thought belong?* was not a conceptual explanation but an ecological injunction: *Present your bodies to Earth and be thankful for them.*

Well, then . . .

The Holding of our Human Learning

*“In the Belonging are numerous languages, and they live in our bodies
and in the Earth and in Silence.”²*

Our communion in these languages forms in a place of no agitations, a sacrament of stillness. This is a living expression in the body of earthen humility, of inner reverence before the mystery of our clay. In 2006 I was known by the Wisdom of Earth in a mountain “calling to ancient knowing within me, wordless memory resident in bones and blood, in organs and muscle tissue, in neurons and dendrites and the gathered complexity of their long evolutionary history and ineffable emergence as repository of hidden treasure living in kinship with the forest mosses and velvet foxglove and sap of oak and flight of lark—and the depths of earthen mountain and rock with its story of fire and water and air and sacred emergence of Life.”³ This was not a revelation to be absorbed and put to use. Instead, being given a profound seeing, a living Recognition, without the means to write it down, was my introduction to the essential primal constraints that hold our human Learning and gift us intimacy with Mystery.

² Ibid., 11.

³ Ibid., 6.

The Recognition to offer body thankfulness was a continuation and actualization of those primal constraints. Being known into a knowing without words is not a condition nor even a state of being but an experience of a primal relationship.

“*The body is a sacred threshold . . . the sensuous is sacred in the deepest sense.*”⁴

“*To spend time in silence before the mystery of your body brings you toward wisdom and holiness.*”⁵

~ John O’Donahue

What if the mystery of the human body is intimate to the Knowing of Earth? Earth intelligence is not abstract-conceptual but physical-ecological. So then, what if ontological understanding for the human is held within participation in Earth intelligence, is the potentially resonate presence to that Intelligence? What if we cannot be intelligent on our own, outside eco-participation? And what if this mysterious inclusion of us bodily into Earth’s story is how Earth informs our journey in the Belonging, how she tells each of us her story of who we are? And what if this sacramental forming of us in our journey is that new birth we’ve heard tell of and the forming of non-derivative understanding? What if an egoistic attachment to conceptual “truth” is avoided only in the sacramentality of our clay?

And why would that last thought be important?

David Abram helps us here:

“Ecologically considered, it is not primarily our verbal statements that are “true” or “false,” but rather the kind of relations that we sustain with the rest of nature. A human community that lives in a mutually beneficial relation with the surrounding earth is a community, we might say, that lives in truth. The ways of speaking common to that community—the claims and beliefs that enable such reciprocity to perpetuate itself—are, in this important sense, *true*. They are in accord with a right relation between these people and their world. Statements and beliefs, meanwhile, that foster violence toward the land, ways of speaking that enable the impairment or ruination of the surrounding field of beings, can be described as *false* ways of speaking . . . A civilization that relentlessly destroys the living land it inhabits is not well acquainted with *truth*, regardless of how many supposed facts it has amassed regarding the calculable properties of its world.

Hence I am less concerned with the “literal” truth of the assertions that I have made in this work than I am concerned with the kind of relationships that they make possible.”⁶

⁴ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1997), 47-48.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶ David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 264.

Living human knowing is relational and actualizes the practicalities of our Belonging. If the word *truth* has any ontological reference, it is to this. Conceptual truth on this level exists only in our derivative imaginings. Conceptual expression is not of the nature of truth in the sense that Abram speaks of. My original experience at Cashel Kilty embodied detachment from conceptual knowing in its correctness and incorrectness as understanding. This is contextual to the locating of our capacity for conceptualization within its evolutionary Belonging.

*“When [the human] mind was separated from the structure in which it is immanent . . .
humanity embarked on fundamental error, which in the end will surely hurt us.”*⁷

~ Gregory Bateson

On the surface of the land and within the layered earth among the strata, memory awaits of primal events that formed the Holding of Life. Our tiny memories cannot receive this Presence of indelible recollection in the stones and ancient rock, markings and forms that await our awareness. These cannot be known by digging, excavating, not by any invasive force of analysis, for all such obstructs our awareness of the Memory.

Though the stones do not live in the biological sense, they do hold marks of the Mystery of Origin and of Life—the upheavals and planetary shifts no living creature could have endured, but once settled into form became the matrix of life, the Holding where birth could be born. Rather than separating living creatures from the “nonliving” rock and earthen surface, we can Learn presence to the stones and the soil and its innumerable tiny worlds, which presence can open us to the Mystery of our own being. Those who call to the “elementals” evoke an ancient mythos that Recognized our inviolable Belonging to the earthen. The lifeforms closest to the roots and the rocks and to the markings of memory in the stones live intimately with the Origin Mystery and invite us to become still and leave behind our claims to superior knowledge. They ask us to allow ourselves *to be known* in Listening to Earth, to the song of first-births breathing in the ground beneath our feet, births emergent from the primal womb of the Mystery that echoes the beginning of the universe, of being from non-being. This interface between life and the “inanimate” earth is one of the places the Silence dwells. This interface is a teacher of humans. It holds the sacrament of our humanness: there is no Knowing without being known into the embodiment of the landscape. Authentic human intelligence lives within the body within the landscape; when we separate these, we lose real Learning and fall back on insistent claims to know “truth.”

The Wisdom of Life and Living Beings

The Reality is that we live not only within the topography of landscape but also with the multitude of beings related to us in the sacred limitations of clay.

⁷ Peter Harries-Jones, *A Recursive Vision: Ecological Understanding and Gregory Bateson* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 219.

The birds
and all the creatures of the earth
are unutterably themselves.
Everything is waiting for you.⁸

~ David Whyte

In the sense that David Abram spoke of, all the non-human creatures of Earth live in truth. They are unutterably themselves in eco-participation with their environment. In this sense, might we learn to recognize identity as eco-location? Where does one belong within the Intelligence of Earth? As the climate suffers and the planet warms, all the creatures of Earth wait for us to Recognize our place and thus become who we really are. And . . . we cannot do that without them. Taxonomically, we are all human beings, but becoming unutterably our original human self requires a journey.

As in our evolutionary history, we could not have become human apart from the earlier long journey of the Others, our coming to see is also inseparable from them. We must cease to use them as a component of our purposeful *means* of seeing (knowing); it is imperative now that we learn to see *with* them, within the totality of seeing in the Belonging. Outside of that intimacy we only think we see. Even the soul of our humanness depends on this embodied Belonging together. John O'Donohue said, "It is in and through your body that your soul becomes visible."⁹ Our humanness is real only within the total embodiment of Life and living beings in the complexity of all our eco-relationships.

In that same biological Integrity of the Living Earth, our minds are situated within the Greater Mind of Earth. My personal knowledge—in so far as it is Real from being known—lives in a wider habitat, or region, of Earthmind in which Learning occurs ongoingly. A mistake of our acculturation is to assume we own knowledge, that we can "have" knowing of our own apart from our Belonging to Earth. We believe we can obtain and store up knowledge in personal possession for personal use. We can indeed do something that has that appearance, but it is what the Buddhists call "maya," illusion. All such "knowing" is derivative. In Reality, we cannot take hold of ontological knowing and own it. To believe we have done so is the great illusion, now become a global delusion. This touches intimately the human intellect in the process of learning.

The mechanisms of conceptualization as means for explanation and explanation as understanding have infused and organized human thought processes so thoroughly that even our approaches to the ineffable—the spiritual, the sacred—reach for clarity of explanation and defined steps for applying that explanatory knowledge in order to achieve spiritual "goals." The entirety of this imposed

⁸ David Whyte, *Everything is Waiting for You* (Many Rivers Press, 2003).

⁹ John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara*, 45.

control of mental process is civilization's enterprise for escaping the ecological intimacy of being known.

Intellect in isolation from bodymind tends to act in ways narrowly purposeful. Typically, the acculturated intellect serves the acculturated egoic self with all its insecurities, but perhaps the authentic service of the human intellect is to our human presence within Earthmind, and perhaps that service is not as source and means of comprehension but as one avenue of *expression* of understanding brought to us otherwise. Within our Belonging to Earth, the intellect is not limited to probing; it can rejoice in our Innermost experience of being known into Recognition and revere that sacred encounter and—sometimes—serve the expression of it within bodymind and, occasionally, to others. Within the Belonging and our life in the Ancient Knowing, the human intellect is not a master of concepts and correctness but a servant of expression in Recognition.

Images of Truth

“(There has been) . . . a destructive mismatch between human behavior and the characteristics of the biosphere within which human beings live and on which they depend. This mismatch is rooted . . . in the human capacity to think about the natural systems and act on that knowledge.”¹⁰

~ Gregory Bateson

We have been acculturated to assume that if we have enough accurate information and we are committed to truth and have a clear perception of it, then we can know how to arrange human society effectively and act individually to make things better. That assumption, along with all that follows from it, is the territory of human judgment, for presented with all the information available, we select what to use. We judge what constitutes truth, and we act on those judgments. Furthermore, we make those selective judgments based on our intentions, rarely questioning the source of those intentions.

All this is contrary to the ecological life processes of the biosphere in which we evolved and in which we inseparably remain. The instrumental essence of our selected discursive knowledge gravitates against the complex intimacies of Living ecologies. The portal of return to ecological participation is the letting go of judgments about truth as necessary for human conceptualization.

The human capacity for conceptualization comes to us from within Earth's long Learning, the evolutionary forming of us. The problems and ruin we have caused did not originate from a defect in that capacity but from our assuming management of it and particularly from our construction of the mechanisms of conceptualization as management toolbox. That development made

¹⁰ Gregory Bateson quoted in Mary Catherine Bateson, *Our Own Metaphor* (New York: Hampton Press, 2004), x.

conceptualization subject to self-conscious and self-determined purposes, thus engendering a humanly controlled, derivative understanding infused with the impulse to dominance.

But even where we've managed to exile the impulse to dominance from our thinking and embraced concepts of ecological behavior, we have not thereby rendered our bodies intimate to the Knowing of Earth.

Who among us is fully aware of our condition? The massiveness and cognitive complications and presumed reality of civilized human occupation of the planet deeply imprint the modern psyche. We are all infused with the mental constructs of a manipulation vast enough to contain the entirety of modern civilization. We carry in our bodies the illusion of right and wrong conceptualizations as light and darkness.

Furthermore, we are now making our "reality" more and more efficiently virtual, thereby engulfing the entire world in conversations constructed from the conceptual mechanisms of human dominance. But the dominance of human civilization over the Earth has always been an illusion—a virtual reality. The control-by-knowledge programmed into cyberspace promotes our historical error and seems now the inevitable cul-de-sac to which we have been rushing. Seen in the context of the Ancient Knowing, the constructions of civilization are merely artifacts of ecological absence and the virtual reality of computers merely the ultimate technological artifact of that absence.

What, then, can we do within the overwhelm of civilization's claims to know on its own and the incursion that has made into each individual psyche?

Attachment to conceptual beliefs, to "truth," and consequent accumulation of "learning" held in the head exacerbate fragmentation of the human psyche. In being known in the natural world, a Recognition resonates the fragmented psyche as though it were whole, thus touching each element of the psyche in its Real need. Seasons of such being-known can bring the psyche into actual wholeness.

Yet, in the Belonging we are not asked to self-cure, to find a system for fixing ourselves. John O'Donohue again:

*"At this depth there can be no ideology or programme. The idiom of control does not reach this order of being."*¹¹

~ John O'Donohue

What then?

¹¹ John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2004), 14.

What else is there if not the quest for truth, the promulgation and defense of it, and the application of it to human affairs? Perhaps the Recognition that we are all held in a vast Mystery, the nature of which we cannot comprehend but into which we may see just a little. That little is so wondrous and fills the heart with such reverence that the pains and constant difficulties of being human lose the power to shrivel the soul.

There comes to us the earthen sacredness of our human Belonging-to-Life so fulfilling that, even in the midst of our struggles and often bewilderment, it is enough.

Our Journey within Civilization

In the Mystery holding us, seeing is not at all what our civilizational perception of vision has taught us. Vision is neither a seeing into the future prophetically nor a forming of the future instrumentally. *Vision is seeing in the present.* The details, all the particulars of now, know us and can still us in the present so that we are not agitated into corrective action. In the sacrament of stillness in the sacred Dark, the circumstantial details we want to resolve or fix know us into the sacrament of emergence—the wisdom of Light from the Dark of our ancient knowing . . . and we see.

The Living relationship to the current state of things in the world is not one of problem solving and correction but of being-known. Only as the details of our (individual and collective) circumstances know us can we see our Living response to them; only then can we see actual conditions as they Really are.

There is a wondrous mystery of Life at work in the Belonging, and the amazing Grace of it is that civilization cannot prevent its reach into the depths of us. In the very fragmentation of the psyche imposed in our acculturation, we are constantly being offered the grace of return to wholeness in the midst of our brokenness. Thus, the Gospel of Thomas: “Blessed are those who have been persecuted within themselves” (v. 69a). The Samsara experience of being known in our brokenness feels like a desolation of our efforts to do well, to be well, to deploy available resources to work our betterment. The fragmented psyche feels persecuted. The knowing-from-being-known emerges slowly from hidden depths, and Understanding seeps in through the cracks in our defenses.

The wonder of this Learning is the sacramental being-known moving us away from our illusions of possessing truth toward a letting go of “knowledge,” a living perception of its non-reality and an embodied (sacramental) experience of Understanding-in-the-Belonging. This sacrament of Learning comes to us as an unimaginable surprise. The Gospel of Thomas again:

*“The seeker should not stop until he finds. When he does find, he will be disturbed.
After having been disturbed, he will be astonished.” (V. 2)*

The entire hope for the human race lies in this astonishment at the sacred limitations that hold our human Learning.

Blessed Constraints

There was a muddy center before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.¹²

~ Wallace Stevens

The myth that “began” consists of all the stories we’ve been telling ourselves about our place of superiority and knowledge and ability to control things for the better. This would include some of what we normally think of as myth as well as what we think of as science, all the instances in which our articulation is managed by the discursive intellect. But prior to that, according to the poet, was a primal myth of a different nature, articulate in a different way, venerable and complete at a “muddy center,” occasion of our coming to breathe.

In terms of talk, of words as thoughts, the myth before the myth began was silent, its venerableness a non-verbal articulation at the muddy center, a sacrament of the Silence. The venerable myth in its embodiment was emergence of a Living Context-of-Place in which our humanness could draw its birthing breaths and continue to breathe thereafter. At our muddy center lies the ancient Knowing of our humanness, the myth before talk, articulate in its form as embodiment of our original humanness. This is the venerably complete which alone is capable of Recognizing in its surroundings all that corresponds to it, and each such Recognition manifests as a sacramental resonance—embodied knowing articulating itself without words.

The myth before the myth began includes all of Earth and the Web of Life within which our muddy center emerged, so our resonance of Recognition is first of all and originally a sacramental response to the landscape, to forms in the Natural World as they locate the individual human within the Belonging. This is the opening of our muddy center to its ecological articulation.

The myth before the myth began is present in the silent (no talk) forms of Earth and the Living complexity of their relationships as original (non-verbal) Story. The venerable and complete myth articulates our human participation in its Living Story, knowing us into Recognitions that render conscious mind silent, empty of discursive thought, the Emptiness of being known into stillness. At the moment of Recognition, the conscious mind harbors no words; *bodymind articulates its ancient Knowing as resonance*. The places where words move about are silent. Later, these silent places become the receiving matrix for articulations emerging from the inner-knowing from being known into

¹² Wallace Stevens, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (Cummington, MA: Cummington Press, 1942).

Recognition. All this lies at the center of our capacity for contemplative presence to the Natural World and to words.

Contemplative reading has been a human practice for a very long time. Reading a work not limited to discursive language (poetry, lyrical prose, writing inviting heart presence (such as *Anam Cara*) may still the conscious mental operations that analyze and evaluate and read for mastery. What happens when we do not read to take in ideas and assimilate them into the existing schemas of the mind but read to Recognize articulation of the ancient knowing within us? This *presence* to the written word tends to calm our usual ideational mental traffic and, moving it aside, bring ideas of a different nature.

Unlike our formally acculturated systems of thought and explanation, these ideas do not obstruct emergent awareness of the ancient Knowing embodied within our original humanness. Thoughts from contemplative presence to poetry and other reflective writings often inform in the conscious mind the emergence of a pattern of thought welcoming to the articulation of what we knew but didn't know we knew:

“That giving oneself permission is very close to . . . things like art and things like poetry and rhythmic prayer [which] . . . are discoveries in the literal etymological sense of the word. They are uncoveries of that which one knew before. Then sacredness has something to do with this covering and uncovering . . .”¹³

~ Gregory Bateson

*Things you know before you hear them.
Those are you.
Those are why you are in the world.¹⁴*

~ William Stafford

Why you are in the world is not a question under the purview of the conceptualizations of metaphysics, theology, and philosophy. This *why?* emerges from our evolutionary history, and its answer must of necessity be ecological. Furthermore, its ecological nature is precisely what invites us into the ancient and deeply sacramental working of contemplation living within us. Dudley Young in *Origins of the Sacred* wrote: “. . . the way to make breathings is to stop talking, and if you do *that* . . . the words may come of themselves, unbidden, unforced, and deposit themselves as real presences in the silent spaces you have cleared for them.”¹⁵

¹³ Gregory Bateson, *Sacred Unity: Further Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 303.

¹⁴ William Stafford quoted in John O'Donohue, *Divine Beauty*, 64.

¹⁵ Dudley Young, *Origins of the Sacred* (New York: Random House, 1994), xxviii.

Whence the origin of those non-discursive words?

When we are being known in the Natural World, we feel the Silence in the presence of all non-derivative form, whether geological or biological, touching the depths of our Innermost awareness. In ecological mutuality of presence to such earthen forms, we may feel the stirring of Understanding not as something to hold onto but a *mystery in which we are Held*. As Earth tells us her story of who we are in the Belonging, we find ourselves letting go of the tendency to traffic in good ideas. The Voice of the Silence relieves us from those and welcomes us into the mystery of Unknowing.

One day, I stopped telling myself
all the things I'd been telling myself,
and I stopped needing to know
all the things I'd been needing to know.

~ David Whyte

In the Sanctuary of Ancient Knowing, we Learn to understand that we cannot know.

The language of Silence does not explain. It knows us. Words born of the Silence, formed in the sacred Dark, even when they emerge into voice as expression in idea form, do not directly address the rational faculty but rather touch the capacity for resonance. They emerge into consciousness as Silence-in-form. When spoken, such words can “enter” the hearer as Silence in words, invoking inner stillness and resonance. What occurs is not conceptualization but Recognition. The words resonate in the entire bodymind, not just the conscious, manipulating brain. In the Recognition of the hearer, the words live as potential sacrament; they *know* the hearer.

Speaking the words that were born in the Silence and eventually emerged into conscious awareness can bring the hearer to a place of inner resonance, a moment of being known. However, in print, the immediacy of living encounter is lost. Nevertheless, for readers open to being known (whether conscious of their openness or not), inner knowing may respond in resonance, recognizing expression of itself. So, the expression in print of authentic seeing does not invite mastery of content, knowledge as power. Instead, in its tone of shared humanness and absence of persuasive pressure, it *asks* the reader to be present to the words in Silence, in a state of inner waiting for Recognition. Whatever is there in print that corresponds to where the reader is on his journey will know him. He will recognize himself there—an articulation of the Ancient Knowing within him. A young woman who experienced this while reading a book offered in this way wrote these very telling words:

“When reading or hearing something that you truly connect deeply with, it is like someone is reading from your book at the same moment you are reading from theirs. As if someone is reading, or reminding you of, an excerpt from the ancient text of your soul.”

This is eco-knowing, the ancient Life of sacred communion, and reflects the eco-place of words, of conscious thought and the sacramental nature of human Understanding.

The Silence Knows

When we are bodily aware of the Natural World from within the depths of our humanness, we feel the Silence in the presence of all Learned forms, whether geological or biological. In ecological mutuality of presence to such earthen forms, we may sense the presence of Understanding. As Earth tells us her story of who we are in the Belonging, the Silence inhabits our stillness, and we find we no longer need to traffic in good ideas and pursue corrective projects.

Ontological Silence is the ultimate environment, the Great Container, in which we live and learn and in which Earth has lived and Learned.

For us then, humans living on and evolved from Earth's long Learning, knowing is ontologically planetary and not individual. No one *knows* but only "knows" apart from the vast accumulated knowing of Earth. Our minds live within that greater Mind. In this sense, it is impossible to have knowledge of our own located in personal possession to use as we will. Instead, we must breathe in our kinship to the larger Knowing held in the Silence.

Understanding our human Presence

Those who distinguish between samsara and nirvana are in samsara.
Those who no longer do are in nirvana.

A Buddhist sutra

Although it is necessary to see civilization's claimspace of dominance as the territory of the loss of our humanness, it also comprises the actualities of our journey *of return to* humanness. This is "why" we learn to see the illness of culturemind while also being known into reverencing the circumstances within civilization's machination wherein we are being known. The grace of non-judgment comes to us as this two-fold seeing in which we are no longer blind to our foolish claims of superiority and the harm we've done to the planet and our own humanness, yet we see the Grace of the Belonging holding and knowing us as we struggle and breathe in that very territory.

The intimacy of the belonging together of the ancient knowing in the depths of our humanness *and* our journey within civilization's claims is the matrix of emergent Understanding. Our being known in that journey opens the depths of us. From the sacred Dark of not knowing comes living Understanding, embodied and unexplainable. In the mystery of our humanness we are not instructed; we are known.

The attachment to an image of how the world should be blinds us to what we need to see in how the world is.

The corrective impulse plunges us into illusions about ourselves and our place in the world. No matter how noble our purpose and lofty our projects, the images of correction generate a sense of rightness that obstructs our seeing actual conditions as they Really are.

The sacramental Reality holding us invites neither purposeful alteration of actual circumstances nor transcendence of them, but an awakening to Presence as human relation to what is. Escape is not Real; there is only Presence. To this the Voice of the Silence calls our Remembering. It is not possible to see actual conditions as they Really are, nor our human failures as they Really are, as long as we hug the narrow intention to fix things. When we fight our failings and those of others we obstruct awareness of the Sanctuary of our Belonging. As we are known into the opening up of the ancient knowing within us, the head becomes re-centered in the heart, and the Sanctuary of original participation in the Belonging opens our awareness to the Mystery of presence-to-others, even (especially?) within the precincts of civilization.

What is being called for now is not an enlightened movement to correct civilization's errors but localized restorations of Intelligence. The return of human presence to participation in Earth's Intelligence can occur without separating ourselves from our fellow humans who work to fix things. In fact, our presence to being known in Earth's Intelligence quickens our presence to our neighbors in the midst of their ambitious projects and saves us from the illusions of trying to correct them. The intimacy of the belonging together of our journey within civilization and the ancient knowing in the depths of our humanness becomes the matrix of Understanding. From the sacred Dark of not knowing, of not needing to be right, comes living Understanding, embodied and free from the need to control.

This is critical to our human presence on Earth now because of the inherited burden of our long, civilized history and assumption of rights over the planet. We all feel the overshadowing reality of our collective error as the climate worsens and Earth's irreversible illness becomes undeniable. Now, in the 21st century, we feel the terrible weight of a Recognition too vast in scope and too horrifying to be held within the scaffolding of human concepts. We cannot fix it. There can be no humanly managed correction of the mess we have made. Enclaves of sacred communities as mini-cultures of healthier social-environment structures, as noble as they are, remain places of managed correction, lovely but derivative forms.

However, we can be brought to awaken to authentic Intelligence.

Localized restorations of Intelligence may form within circles of Unknowing, gatherings of openness to being-known. As such gatherings are known into eco-intelligence, a matrix of Understanding may emerge—a birthplace for breathings. What we may be graced to see then is beyond any imagination we can conjure now. Our humanness was born within the unfolding

Intelligence of Earth, so as we are given to return there, our claims to truth are revealed as nothing compared to the order of the seasons and the movement of water and the call of birds—the Ancient Knowing.

Such localized restorations of Intelligence do not separate themselves from our fellows in civilization’s claimspace. In fact, our presence to Earth’s Intelligence quickens presence to our neighbors in the midst of their corrective projects and saves us from the illusions of trying to correct them. Localized restoration of Intelligence in the Belonging is present to all without rightness, without the pressing of claims to truth.

When we contemplatively revisit previous moments of being-known in the Natural World, intimately touched by Earth, the inner Recognition resonant in that original intimacy may be quickened again, and sometimes the Living work it has been doing in us further integrates the psyche in quickening sacrament, and we may become aware of some of this, which sometimes emerges into our conscious minds as words. Such words are not explanation, not maps-of-how-to we can keep for ourselves. They are living and integrative, whole-making, bringing the head into its place in the wholeness of bodymind. Such words are not really concepts as we think of ideas conceptually useful, but their emergent life from the body brings the head into the heart while the person utters them, in inner voice or in whispers, and continues the longer sacralization work of bringing the conscious mind into bodymind in the fullness of our humanness. In the fullness of sacramental consciousness—embodied Knowing-from-being-known—the human is brought into an Understanding that current human awareness and cognition is incapable of imagining. Intelligence is neither disembodied nor abstract but lives in the complexity and communions of clay—our clay and all the clay beings of Earth, the Whispers of the Ancient Knowing held in the Silence.

Held even in the 21st century with all its voices and confusions and endless demands.

How demanding are the days
noisy with words and worries,
spoken and unspoken fears of the pending,
uncontrollable tomorrows
casting their shadows over fevered preparations.

When all the questions today
are about tomorrow,
Who can listen?
Who can hear the Whispers in the days of inner noise?

Yet always the Whispers breathe upon us,
felt on surface days as a sense of something forgotten,
a stirring of sleeping memory.

In small seasons of stillness
felt more deeply as invitation to Listen
to the Silence in its ancient articulations
not to be translated, not to be used,
but surely to be breathed in.

John Shackelton was a long-retired, long-life educator and supporter of the Center for Education, Imagination and the Natural World. He was a graduate of the first class of The Inner Life of the Child in Nature: Presence and Practice program and served on the board twice. This is his third article for *Chrysalis*, and he authored *Opening Forgotten Sanctuaries: Recognizing Education as Sacred Encounter*, under the pseudonym Clay Lerner. Most of the origin of his deepest awareness of the Natural World came during his travels with his wife Ruth over the better part of eleven summers on the west coast of Ireland. The two of them visited out-of-the-way places not easily available for tourists. They found partially inhabited territories, stark mountains, primal valleys, and depths of forest. Their bodies resonated in these surroundings and felt their humanity more deeply there and carried that sense of original humanness with them back into the machinations of the 21st century.



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