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Our Spiritual Nature: An Exploration into Nature Experiences, Spirituality and Environmental Responsibility

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Abstract

My research project explores the reciprocal relationships between nature perception, spirituality and environmental responsibility. Based on twenty-eight in-depth interviews with 'nature-lovers,' environmentalists and 'spiritual seekers,' an insider's-perspective is sketched of how an immanent spiritual sense is experienced and activated in nature, and what its potential is concerning the pressing issues in the world. Seen from a philosophical perspective, the research explores if and how an integral worldview, incorporating an inner or spiritual dimension, interacts with and is supported by concrete experiences in the (natural) world, as well as how it finds expression in the world. This research project gives insight into the possible potential of spirituality in terms of the environmental crisis, and attempts to demystify the concept of spirituality and presents it from a 'this-worldly' perspective.

When struck by the amazing wonders and the captivating beauty of nature, our treatment of the planet seems incomprehensible; we are damaging the earth, and ultimately ourselves. In the age of rationality, we are committing the ultimate irrational act: we are destroying the prerequisites of our own existence. As Ken Wilber, a contemporary American philosopher, expresses, "If the earth is indeed our body and blood, then in destroying it, we are committing a slow and gruesome suicide."¹

When reflecting on the environmental crisis, it appears that science, technology and management alone cannot be the solution to our problems. Even 'technological optimists' must face the fact that technology needs to be developed, implemented and integrated into society, which can only be done with human will and commitment, creativity and intelligence. Although regional, specific and practical solutions are absolutely essential, the following essay will reveal how human nature and spirituality are integral aspects of nature by its

broadest definition, and how this realisation may be a vital component in awakening a sense of environmental responsibility.

The word *nature* holds multiple meanings. Nature is the basic principle of life. Not only is the whole universe nature, but even we, regardless of how civilised we have become, are part of nature, are nature ourselves. Moreover, the word nature refers to the *essence* or disposition of things and people. In Buddhism and other spiritual doctrines they speak of *Buddha nature* or *true nature*, the inherent free and enlightened dimension in all beings, suggesting that the natural order penetrates both the physical and the metaphysical realms.

In this paper, I reflect on 'our spiritual nature,' viewed in the context of my research. Through interviews conducted among environmentalists, 'nature-lovers' and 'spiritual seekers,' insight is given into how *nature*, *spirituality*, and *environmental responsibility* are interconnected in the experience and understanding of the individual. The first section gives a simplified overview of the modern paradigm and how it structures and limits our understanding and experience. This is followed by an exploration of the elusive and often undefined concept of spirituality, a discussion of my research project, a look at the project's findings, and my conclusions.

The Modern Paradigm

The modern paradigm is often considered to be a root cause of the environmental crisis. This materialistic worldview denies the existence of anything other than that which is empirically observable and sensory tangible, yet it is profound in its knowledge and understanding of the physical-material world. Wilber therefore characterises this modern world as *flatland* –a purely material world, lacking intrinsic value, depth, essence, spirituality, subjectivity, and consciousness.² He explains this using a four-quadrant-model of reality, pointing out that everything in reality manifests itself in four inseparable dimensions. Everything has an *exterior*

¹ Ken Wilber. *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), p.12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 424.

or 'outside' (its material form or structure) and an *interior* or 'inside' (its consciousness or 'depth'). Simultaneously, everything is both a whole in itself (its individuality), and part of greater wholes (its communalness).

These four dimensions are all intimately correlated with, and dependent upon, but not reducible to each other. Precisely because these different dimensions are so intimately connected, it seems plausible to deny the existence of any one of them. That is exactly what the modern worldview does, according to Wilber: *it reduces the whole interior domain to its counterparts in the exterior domain.*³ All the interior phenomena are explained pointing at their exterior counterparts. To explain consciousness we point at the brain; love, in this view, is the result of chemical reactions. Pitrim Sorokin, an original thinker within the field of sociology, comes to a similar conclusion, and refers to the '*sensate*' worldview in this context. This worldview is characterised by the assumption that

true reality and value is sensory. Only what we see, hear, smell, touch, and otherwise perceive through our sense organs is real and has value. Beyond such a sensory reality, either there is nothing, or, if there is something, we cannot sense it; therefore it is equivalent to the non-real and the non-existent.⁴

Sorokin sees this major principle, the *sensory principle*, as the foundation of modern culture, which, in all its main compartments, is an articulation of, is based upon, and is integrated around this principle. He critically points out the consequences of this way of viewing 'reality':

This path led inevitably to the growth of materialism, because nothing can be more sensory than matter; to a more radical mechanisation, because nothing can be simpler than mechanical motion; to growing hedonism, utilitarianism and sensuality in the world of the values, because only sensory pleasure and pain, sensory utility and disutility are real from this standpoint.⁵

This objectivistic worldview devalues the whole of the reality that exists beyond sensory perception.

³ Ibid., pp. 426-428.

⁴ Pitrim Sorokin, *The Crisis of Our Age* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1992), p. 252.

⁵ Ibid. p. 254.

Reducing nature to its material aspects, without (intrinsic) value or meaning results not only in a *devaluation* of nature, but also in an *alienation from* nature. When material boundaries are taken to be ultimate boundaries, alienation, fragmentation and isolation results. In this objectified context, the subjective human being, who is perceived to be of a fundamentally different order or disposition, inevitably becomes isolated and alienated from nature. This results in the subject-object, human-nature, or mind-body dualism, usually referred to in philosophy as *Cartesian dualism*. A necessary step in dealing with the environmental crisis is to shift this paradigm towards a worldview which acknowledges the interconnectedness of humans and nature, as well as a pervasive inner or 'spiritual' dimension.

The Inner or Spiritual Dimension

A. H. Almaas, a contemporary spiritual teacher and author, speaks about *true nature*, or the 'essential dimension,' when referring to this inner or spiritual dimension:

True nature is the inner nature of ourselves and everything. It is formless and it is the basis of all forms. As an analogy, consider water: The basic elementary compound of H₂O can manifest as ice, snow, rain, steam or fog. To recognize that the essence of all of these is water is to see beyond the different manifestations of form in order to recognize their common nature.

Similarly, true nature is our innate essence, but we can see it only when we see through the particular forms, which is possible only when we experience without any veils or distortions. In our conventional everyday reality, our unconscious prejudices and conditioning distort and limit our perceptions such that we cannot see what is most fundamental. Usually we see the appearance of things and take it to be the whole of reality, meanwhile missing the essence of all we see. This is why conventional reality lacks a spiritual ground. We are seeing the appearance as if it were separate from or without its true nature. It is like believing the true nature of ice to be the little cubical shape it takes on in the freezer tray. We believe that the many forms that life takes are inherently different and separate and their nature is defined by their physical properties.

However, when we see without veils, we experience that the whole of existence possesses a single true nature – its common essential ground – and we find no distinction between appearance and true nature, for nothing can be separate from its true nature. This is objective reality – all of existence perceived in its true unobscured condition, in which everything is inseparable from its true nature.⁶

Form, *exterior* or *sensate* reality, is distinguished here from *interior* or *spiritual* reality. Both are considered to be true, present and real, which is why Almaas refers to both of them as ‘objective reality.’ The interior and the exterior are distinguishable, but fundamentally inseparable. They are Matter and Spirit; Form and Formless; Appearance and Essence; Object and Subject; Content and Ground. Therefore, when speaking about ‘spirituality,’ I refer to this understanding of an *all-pervasive, immanent spiritual dimension*, manifesting itself in, through and as ourselves and the world we live in.⁷ Recognising this spiritual dimension solves the reductionism and dualism of the modern worldview and we see that everything has (intrinsic) value and is interconnected. Moreover, since this all-permeating Spirit manifests itself in the world, this immanent spirituality asks from and invites the individual to be fully present in, *and connected to the world*, thereby creating the potential for a sense of environmental responsibility.

⁶ A. H. Almaas, *Spacecruiser Inquiry: True Guidance for the Inner Journey* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), p.32.

⁷ This understanding is found in different philosophical, spiritual and religious traditions; for instance in different branches of Buddhism (emptiness as the intrinsic nature of reality), in different traditions of Hinduism like Advaita Vedanta and the Upanishads (*Brahman* as the holy power which informs and animates the whole of reality), in Daoism (in which the underlying but ineffable principle pervading the universe is the Dao, the Way) and in indigenous religions (which often distinguish between the closely interwoven spiritual and visible worlds). It is also found in the mystical strands of the Abrahamic traditions, like Kabbalah, Sufism (union with God and the world) and by mystics within Christianity (e.g. Teilhard de Chardin, Johannes Eckhart) as well as in the thinking of philosophers like Plato (the Platonic Forms), Plotinus (the world as a reflection of the One) and Hegel (the processes of existence as manifestations of one absolute spirit – *Geist*). For more information, see: Ninian Smart, *The World's Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Vagueness surrounding the concept of spirituality obstructs the full use of this potential. One of the main problems is *the ineffableness* of this spiritual or divine dimension, the experience of which can never be captured through language.⁸ In addition, the spiritual is immeasurable, unquantifiable and impossible to detect through scientific-empirical means and standards. In order to use its full potential, more conceptual as well as experiential clarity is necessary.

The Research

Research within the field of environmental psychology, for example wilderness-experience research, suggests that experiences with nature can prompt broad and significant psychological changes in the participating individuals, ranging from overall perspectives on life and nature, to personal priorities and involvements.⁹ A variety of theories and philosophies claim that a more spiritual experience or perception of nature has a potential ‘healing’ effect on our worldviews and basic attitudes towards nature, which can lead to more environmentally friendly attitudes and behaviours. Such findings imply that a spiritual perception of nature can drastically change the way we view the world, nature and ourselves.¹⁰

My own research project offers insight into this *transformative potential* of experiences in nature, and how this relates to a personal sense of ‘spirituality.’ The intention is to ‘sketch a picture’ of how an immanent spiritual sense is experienced and activated in nature, and what its potential is concerning the pressing issues in the world. Seen from a philosophical perspective, the research

⁸This has been a key issue in the exploration and communication of my research. Finding the appropriate language in which to frame this project has required much contemplation on the meanings and connotations we associate with spirituality and even with events of personal experience.

⁹Janet Frey and Steve Kaplan, ‘Perspectives on wilderness: re-examining the value of extended wilderness experiences’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 6 (1986), pp. 177-188.

¹⁰ See for example: Steve Kaplan and Janet Frey Talbot, ‘Psychological Benefits of a Wilderness Experience’ pp. 163-203 in Altman and Wohlwill, eds., *Behaviour and the Environment* (1983). And: Laura M. Frederickson and Dorothy H. Anderson, ‘A qualitative exploration of the wilderness experience as a source of spiritual inspiration’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, vol. 19 (1999), pp. 21-39.

explores alternatives to the materialistic/ objectivistic paradigm, by inquiring into *integral* worldviews, which incorporate an inner or spiritual dimension. Therefore, this research project not only investigates the possible *potential* of spirituality, in terms of the environmental crisis, it also *demystifies* the concept of spirituality by presenting it from a this-worldly perspective.

The necessary data was acquired through twenty-eight anonymous, in-depth interviews with self-described environmental activists, 'nature-lovers,' and committed 'spiritual seekers.' This research took place in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada,¹¹ in the autumn months of 2002. The choice for Victoria as the setting for this research project was mainly guided by the possibilities for supervision and support as offered by *The Centre for Studies in Religion and Society* at the University of Victoria, as well as by the 'green' atmosphere of the city, both in terms of its many parks and green spaces, and the inclination of its citizens to be involved with nature and the environment.

The respondents were found through approaching local environmental clubs,¹² the Victoria Outdoors Club, and several 'spiritually oriented' organisations.¹³ Through the analysis of this data,¹⁴ I

¹¹ Victoria, a city with approximately 300,000 citizens (<http://www.statcan.ca>), is located on the most southern point of Vancouver Island, a large, forested island surrounded by the Pacific Ocean on Canada's west coast. This capital city of the province of British Columbia is gifted with parks, gardens, green spaces, beaches and the ocean. The city has a moderate maritime climate, which permits dense deciduous growth and rainforests to flourish. Nature is fairly accessible to the citizens of Victoria, who eagerly enjoy their beautiful surroundings. Moreover, the area has an interesting and relatively successful history of environmental activism, which has prevented part of the old-growth forests on the island from being logged. The resource-based industry in the area is still an important economical incentive and so the struggle continues. Characteristic of the city is also the history and presence of the First Nations peoples and their cultures. The University of Victoria helps to shape the community, as do the many elderly who often enjoy their retirement away from the harsh climates in other parts of the country.

¹² The Sierra Club and the Western Canada Wilderness Committee.

¹³ Zen Centre, The Victoria Yoga Centre, the Interfaith Centre of the University of Victoria and the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society of the University of Victoria.

¹⁴ The interviewee's ages ranged between 22 and 76 years, and the education level was generally high. All but two of the respondents had participated in formal education

came to realise the high level of interrelationship between the topics of nature perception, spirituality and environmental responsibility. Three clusters of themes formed the 'leading thread' running through this relationship: being *present in the world*, being *part of the world*, and an *expanded sense of self*. So what is embodied by these three themes? How do respondents understand and experience spirituality?

Present in the World

Virtually all of the respondents describe their experiences in nature as *sensory*. They are fascinated by what they see, they enjoy the warmth of the sun and the freshness of the wind on their skin, they listen to the sounds or embrace the silence and they love the smells. As one respondent expressed, "Your senses are more in tune. You're listening, you're looking, you're feeling, you're moving – possibly you're more in tune with things. Maybe that's why you feel good, or because you feel good."

Some describe their experiences in nature as *grounding*. They feel that going out into nature brings them into direct contact with their immediate surroundings and sensations. They say that they "feel grounded to the earth again," which is meant as "literally feeling the earth under [their] feet." By experiencing the *immediacy* of the natural, living environment, respondents feel that they "get in tune with their senses" and become more *present in*, aware of, and in touch with their immediate space-time-dimension. Instead of being immersed in distant aspects of life and the abstractness of (conceptual) thought, respondents recognise that they actually feel more *present in the world*.

Other themes emerging in this context include the *fascination* and *absorption* many respondents experience in nature. Driven by an inner sense of curiosity and wonder, respondents become "caught up" in the natural environment they are exploring. Furthermore, they speak about nature in *relational terms*. Beyond viewing nature as a one-sided arrangement or "a commodity for consumption," as in *flatland* thinking, people feel that they "participate" or "commune with nature." They feel love, respect, and interest in their natural surroundings. I believe that this implies recognition of an inner or spiritual dimension in nature.

With its beauty, complexity and invigorating sensual stimuli, nature seems to provide a setting in

beyond high school. The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed with support of *Kwalitan*, a computer program for the qualitative analysis of data.

which the individual feels invited to be more present in, open to and aware of the world. I suggest that this theme is the main prerequisite for having a *relationship* with nature, which forms the basis for a sense of environmental responsibility. This insight is reflected in the word “response-ability,” as one respondent pointed out. It is precisely the ability to respond to nature, to be responsive, which is the basis for a sense of responsibility.

Part of the World

This sense of being more present in one’s immediate space-time-dimension is related to an increased sense of being a *participant in the world*. A central theme for virtually all of the respondents is that of *interconnectedness*, ranging from a scientific recognition of how one is physically tied in with nature, to a direct experience of oneness with the divine. Respondents feel part of nature and they recognise that they are nature themselves, which

brings back attachment to the world; being part of the world. Because so much now we separate ourselves from the world –we drive in cars and ‘boxes’, we live and work in ‘boxes’ and we have these artificial climates, the radio, light, inside. . . . it brings you back to the realisation that you are a part of that world, when you are walking in it.

Even though some respondents describe or explain this scientifically, this interconnectedness is often experienced or understood as a spiritual principle in itself. One respondent illustrated how “the feeling of being next to an ocean and feeling the wind through you . . . makes you realise that you can’t separate yourself from the earth, from other people, and that’s where my spirituality comes in.” Some respondents provided insight into mystical experiences of oneness in nature, or encounters that made them feel that “there is something bigger than just me,” as this quote illustrates:

I was standing in this grove of trees, which were all so huge, and so old . . . massive. . . . It was like a cathedral with all the giant pillars going up. The sun was coming in . . . it was just amazing, and I felt so humbled. Referenced maybe. It was a religious experience, and I felt a lot of respect for that nature. . . . I think it is comparable to experiences people have had encountering God . . . that there is something

bigger than just me, and my own being. That there is something about our world that is special . . . you just have this energy that goes through you, that you can’t quite describe –it feels so alive. I think that’s similar to what mystics for thousands of years have felt when they thought they had a connection with God –that power running through you.

Seeing or experiencing this interconnectedness helps the individual realise that they *do* influence the world, that their actions have measurable consequences, because “everything is so interdependent in nature. So often when we interfere with something, it all backfires, because one thing effects another. We are part of that system.” This is therefore likely to result in more environmental awareness and environmentally conscious behaviour. When people “feel part of nature,” or feel that “nature is not separate from me,” they are more inclined to *identify* with the interests and the ‘pains’ of nature, for “what we are doing to nature, we are doing to ourselves.” Consequently, this identification creates awareness of how humanity is tied in with nature, compelling the individual to defend its rights. Moreover, realising that one is participating in an interconnected whole also creates awareness that one *can* influence the world, that individual actions *do* have the *potential* to change something. The resulting feeling of power and responsibility is probably an essential component in becoming environmentally active. Nearly all the environmentalists who participated in this project expressed that the belief in their own ability to make change *is* a driving force in their motivation and commitment.

An Expanded Sense of Self

When individuals begin to realise and experience themselves as part of this larger world, they also come to experience themselves differently; their sense of self changes. Some respondents speak in terms of feeling “more myself,” “more real,” “stronger” and “more aware.” Many gain access to parts of themselves that were neglected in the business of daily life, like a sense of inner peace, empowerment, beauty and joy. Respondents speak about the *expansion*, the *openness* and the *freedom* they often experience in nature, how they “get out of their selves,” and become totally immersed in the beauty and overwhelming presence of their location. Some explain how they feel their “boundaries dropping away,” or that “the need to cover up things

disappears.” One person experienced this larger sense of self on a diving expedition:

My physical experience was one of flow. . . . the body sensation [one of] porousness, the barrier has somehow opened up. Emotionally I felt very calm, peaceful, content. But also at the same time a sense of wonder and awe. And curiosity too . . . So it was one of those magical moments in life, that I wish I had more. . . . To me it is a sense of transcending this ordinary existence that many of us in the Western world experience most of the time. Transcendence of that, to a place of deep connection, and perhaps moreover awareness.

This expanded experience of oneself often seems to put life back in *proportion*. Worries from the city disappear and everyday trivialities are revealed for what they are. The confrontation and interaction with the immensity of nature also seems to put people’s feeling of self in proportion. A sense of smallness in the midst of the great and amazing universe is contrasted by feeling part of and participating in this which is so big and overwhelming. Yet instead of feeling tiny and threatened, people describe feeling empowered and uplifted through seeing this ‘bigger picture.’ As one respondent explains:

You feel small. But it's not like a bad small; it is a very powerful small. It doesn't make you feel like you're less worthy. It's like you know you have a great responsibility –you can't just think about yourself. You're called to do something more.

The incomprehensible vastness of nature, when directly experienced, easily makes one think in greater, universal terms. Instead of only looking through anthropocentric glasses, a star-filled sky on a bright night or a huge mountain peak can give the individual a glimpse of the infinite, of the divine. The result is often a different perspective on life –on oneself, one’s capabilities and on what is truly important. More than just rethinking their lives, respondents are sometimes confronted with a deep felt sense of what their life is about and what place they want to fulfill as a vital participant in the intricate whole. An innate sense of *purpose* and *meaning* is discovered.

The Understanding and Experience of Spirituality

There is an unmistakably spiritual dimension to respondents’ experiences of nature. They characterise their sense or understanding of spirituality in terms of a “higher power,” a “spirit” or divine dimension, which is understood to be closely connected to our world, either as creator, creative force, or an intrinsic aspect of creation. This results in a more *immanent* type of spirituality, as this respondent expresses:

I guess to me God is something very big, very nurturing. I think of God, not as a little old man, but as a sort of mothering spirit, who created the world, but probably also is in the world, in us, the trees and the animals, in some way. And that's probably why, when we are alone in this kind of [natural] setting, we're able to sense some of this spirit of God, in this beauty, in the creation.

Although this “unnamable force” is often *contrasted* with material or scientific reality, it is not generally considered to be in opposition to it. Respondents refer to the spiritual in terms of being beyond what we understand, what we know from science, and what we can express in language. Though often explicitly acknowledging science and its contributions, interview subjects say that “science doesn’t give the whole picture.” “The universe is a spiritual thing as well as a physical thing . . . scientists analyse the universe and learn the physical laws by which it operates, but that isn’t the whole thing.”

However, the *culture of materialism* is understood to be the opposite of spirituality. Materialism is, then, roughly defined as the dominance of a materialistic, consumer-based way of understanding, evaluating and living in the world. Many respondents emphasise that they do not see any use or cause in “going for the money,” nor do they feel tempted to go along with the cultural values of materialism. Their spirituality provides them with an alternative source for finding purpose, meaning and contentment in life, of “being content with who you are –enjoying who and where you are.”

Respondents describe, not surprisingly, that their personal spirituality gives them a sense of meaning, one stating that “spirituality answers the question of who are we to be, and what life is all about.” Others stress that their spiritual foundations inform them with a “higher call” or a “higher cause.” This is often directly related to the view of the world as a

meaningful whole, in which everything is significant and has its own place and purpose, while simultaneously existing in intimate connection with everything else.

Conclusion

By challenging the popular concept of spirituality as an other-worldly and inaccessible phenomenon, a new perspective on human-nature dynamics is gained. Connecting with our true or spiritual nature seems to go hand in hand with becoming more attuned with the natural world, as nature exists not only around us, but also in us and through us, and is a manifestation of the spiritual.

As a number of research-projects suggest, direct and profound encounters with the natural environment appear to have a significant influence on a personal sense of environmental responsibility.¹⁵ Understanding the *inherent dynamics* and the *logic behind* these processes is crucial if we are to enhance, support and guide these experiences. Stimulating individuals to *directly* explore their relationship with nature in *the laboratory of their personal experience* may be the key to fostering and inspiring a sense of environmental responsibility. Such a spontaneous, open-ended exploration leads to the development of natural conclusions about humanity's relationships with environmental phenomena, and reveals the fluidity, porosity and the constructedness of the boundaries established between them. This interactive, explorative and expansive approach offers, therefore, an exciting perspective on environmental education, which may support the development of new methodologies in this field.

The main contribution of this research-project is in the provision of an *insider's-view* of different ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the world, as explained and described by the interview respondents. This worldview is, in many cases, quite an integral view, acknowledging material as well as spiritual reality. Spirituality, experienced in and through the (natural) world, not only allows individuals to have a meaningful and satisfying relationship with that world, but potentially also results in a paradigm shift – a move away from materialistic, individualistic *flatland* consumer society to more inclusive, expansive and

participatory ways of thinking, feeling and acting. Those who encounter their 'true nature' through truly experiencing nature can no longer continue to naively participate in environmental destruction: they must respond to the earth, their lifeline.

¹⁵ See for example: Louise Chawla, 'Significant Life Experiences Revisited: a review of research on sources of environmental sensitivity,' *Environmental Education Research*, vol.4. (1998), pp. 369-382.