

# An Acoustic Theology of Ecology: Animals, Jazz, Cosmology and Sustainability

BY JAY B. MCDANIEL

The world needs people who delight in novelty. There are at least two places in human life where this comes naturally: animals and jazz.

Animals are our closest biological and spiritual kin, and yet they delight us in their differences. In these differences they reveal forms of intelligence and creativity that are not reducible to our own projections but that have beauty in their own right. We come to realize that animals are not people in the sense of being human, but that they are indeed persons, because they are subjects of their own lives, each with a unique voice.

Jazz reveals a variety of voices in which life can be expressed. If we listen to it carefully we hear humanly created voices of one sort or another, some vocal and some instrumental. But we also hear the voices of the more-than-human world: the clapping of thunder, the singing of birds, the murmur of wind, the chanting of insects. The sounds of jazz, like the voices of animals, remind us that we lie within, not outside of, a larger world of the Ten Thousand Things.<sup>1</sup> Or perhaps better, the Ten Thousand Sounds. Chinese scholars tell us that in Chinese thought the building blocks of the universe are not static things but rather dynamic happenings or events.

The human task today is for us to learn within the larger realm of the Ten Thousand Sounds, adding our voice to the mix in ways that are creatively integrated with the rest of creation. The creative side of this integration requires us to train our ears to listen for differences as well as similarities and to enjoy the novelty. Spending time with animals and listening to jazz can be spiritual disciplines of a sort. We might call them eco-disciplines.

If we are theistic in orientation, we might also speak of them as practices through which we find God and God finds us. Of course it can seem odd to add a word like “God” to the mix. For theists the word is inviting, but for others the word too often suggests a monarch in heaven who is cut off from the world by the boundaries of divine transcendence and who somehow discourages a respect for creation.

As a panentheist in the process or Whiteheadian tradition, I understand God differently. I understand God as an indwelling Lure toward beauty within the whole of the universe and within each creature and also as a Deep Listening who hears all the voices in the universe. This lure toward beauty is found within humans and other animals as an indwelling urge to live with satisfaction—with harmony and intensity—relative to the situation at hand. And the Deep Listening is an encompassing compassion which feels the feelings of all living beings with a tender care, sharing in their joys and sufferings. The Listening is the receptive side and the Lure is the active side. We might call them the Yin and Yang of the universe.

---

**The great Tao covers everything like a flood.  
It flows to the left and to the right.  
The ten thousand things depend upon it  
and it denies none of them.  
It accomplishes its task yet claims no reward.  
It clothes and feeds the ten thousand things  
yet it does not attempt to control them.  
Therefore, it may be called “the little.”**

**The ten thousand things return to it,  
even though it does not control them.  
Therefore, it may be called “the great.”**

**So it is that the True Person does not wish to be great  
and therefore becomes truly great.<sup>1</sup>**

\*To view the author’s art, go to [www.angelamanno.com](http://www.angelamanno.com)

<sup>1</sup> Verse 24, *Tao Te Ching*, available at [www.the-bigview.com/tao-te-ching/chapter34.html](http://www.the-bigview.com/tao-te-ching/chapter34.html) : Internet, accessed May 16, 2008.

Whitehead proposes that the universe as a whole lives and moves and has its being within the larger context of this Lure and Listening, the Yin and the Yang. Christians might call it God's call and God's empathy.

If God is understood this way, then an appreciation of animals and jazz can be a way that humans find God and also a way that humans appreciate the diversity of the Ten Thousand Sounds. These two movements—one toward the vertical sacred and one toward the horizontal—go together. We find the world in God and God in the world. In the remainder of this essay I offer some reflections on how this might work out in human life. I begin with a further meditation on listening and its potential role in theology.

### **The Need for Acoustic Theology**

In the beginning is the listening. Before we are born, when we lie inside our mother's wombs, we cannot see anything because our eyes are closed. But we hear our mother's voice and know the voice as part of who we are. In this knowing there is an intimacy of felt connection. The listener is the listening and the listening is the listened to.

Later in life, once we are born, the same situation occurs when we listen to live music. We can close our eyes and listen to the sounds coming from outside us. And yet the sounds are inside us, too. We know that we are different from the music and yet the music is inside us as part of who we are, at least in that moment. Here the voices are not simply those of our mother. They are the voices of the world. Through music we see the truth of what Whitehead's saying in *Modes of Thought*: "We are in the world and the world is in us."<sup>2</sup>

Of course the same situation applies when we listen to the tones of other people's voices and to the sounds of nature. As we visit with a friend who is suffering, we see the friend with our eyes and listen to what she says. There is a separation of knower and known. But the tone of her voice affects us at a more intimate level, revealing her mood. If we close our eyes just for a moment and simply listen, her mood is within us. Visually she has disappeared from sight. But psychologically she is still inside us.

Given the sense of connection that auditory experience so often brings, it is strange that so much Western theology has neglected it. Of course there have been theologies of music and attention to the spoken word, especially in preaching. And in Islam there are profound traditions which highlight Quranic recitation as a means by which God can be directly experienced in human life.

Nevertheless in so much Western theology the emphasis has been on visual experience and even more specifically on the visual experience of reading and responding to texts. This emphasis on visual experience has also been prominent in Western theories of knowledge. We equate knowing the world with having insight and with having a view of the world: that is, a worldview.

This puts eco-theology in a strange position. On the one hand it wants to help people recover a sense of felt connection with worlds of hills and rivers, plants and animals. It wants to help us come to our senses. But on the other hand it inherits where knowing is reduced to visual knowing and to metaphors that come from sight. Thus eco-theologians typically speak of ecological world-views but not so much of world-sounds or world-touches or world-feelings.

The visual metaphors can indeed provide a sense of felt connection with the world. Images can play a profound role in moral and spiritual training. We can learn a lot about the world and about the divine reality attention to light and colors. But somehow an emphasis on vision must be balanced and enriched by attention to other ways of knowing, including the knowing that comes from listening. The philosophy of Whitehead is especially helpful in this regard in at least three ways.

First, with his notion of experience in the mode of causal efficacy, he offers a way of understanding how sounds embody a transfer of feeling from vocalist to listener. He suggests that when we hear the song of the bird, for example, we are hearing sound-feeling. We are being causally influenced not only by the objective behavior of the bird, but also by the feelings of the bird. The world of sound is an expression of energy and energy is feeling.

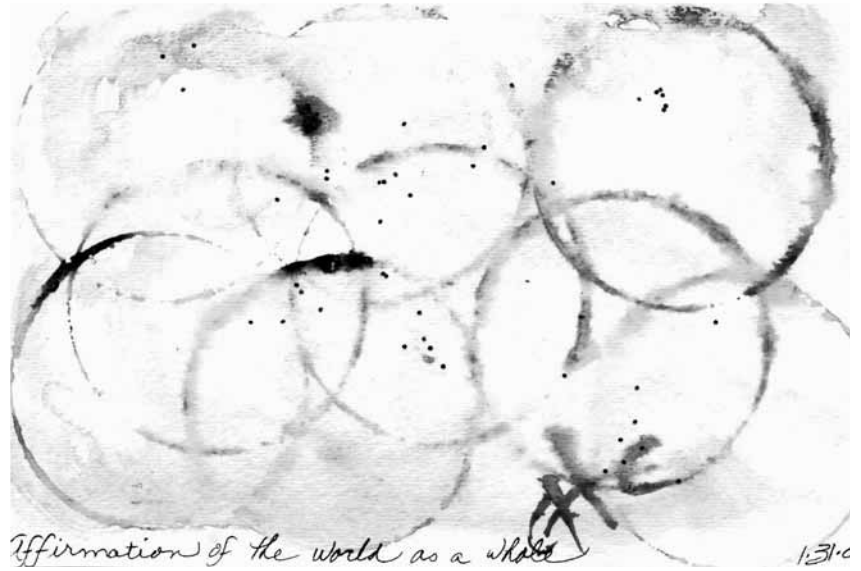
<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Modes of Thought* (1938; repr. New York, The Free Press, 1969), 165.

Second, with his notion that ideas are not reducible to their linguistic expressions, he opens the door for appreciating how people and other living beings can have forms of wisdom that are valuable in their own right and that are not reducible to “texts” and “discourse.” From Whitehead’s perspective, plants and animals can know things without having (or needing) human language to express it. So can human beings. We can know what is happening in our own bodies, for example, and our understanding need not be mediated by verbal or written language.

Third, with his unique way of understanding God, Whitehead offers a way of understanding how humans and other animals might experience God in non-verbal yet powerful ways and, equally important, how God might experience humans and other animals in such ways. These non-verbal ways can include touch, taste, smell, and movement, imagination, and hearing.

Hearing plays a special role in the Western biblical traditions, insofar as the presence of God is so often described as a calling from God. Thus God can be heard but not seen, sometimes as a still small voice within the human heart. Whitehead’s perspective makes strong contact with what we might call the auditory stream of Western thinking. For example, Whitehead’s God can easily be described as a Deep Listener who listens to the world moment by moment, calling it into forms of beauty relevant to the situation at hand. The “primordial nature of God” listens to possibilities and the “consequent nature of God” listens to what is happening in the world. The very life of God is an ongoing activity of coordinating these two realities for the sake of the universe.

God is not external to the world in the way, for example, that one body might be external to another. God surrounds or encircles the universe, which means that the unfolding universe is inside God, much in the way that an embryo might be inside a womb. God is the Womb of the universe. Moreover, in Whitehead’s philosophy, this Womb cannot be understood on the analogy of subjects and predicates. In human life we often separate subjects and predicates as if the subjects were



one thing and the predicates (their activities) quite another. But Whitehead proposes that the true subjects of our world—living cells, individual animals, individual people, God—are not separable from their activities. Thus the Womb is the act of listening. In the beginning is the Listening.

All of this suggests that a rather unique form of “acoustic eco-theology” might be developed with help from Whitehead. In the following paragraphs I will sound this out in a more practical way. I want to introduce Whitehead’s way of thinking further with help from music and more specifically from jazz. And I want show how jazz can be a source for those of us who seek a more sustainable future.

### **Jazz as Sound and Idea**

By jazz I mean the kind of music you would hear when you listen to *Kind of Blue*, the album by Miles Davis sextet. Its songs feature vast streams of improvisational melody played by Miles Davis (trumpet), John Coltrane (saxophone), Cannonball Adderley (saxophone), Bill Evans (piano) and Wynton Kelly (piano) and Jimmy Cobb (drums). The songs are exemplary of the kind of sound that is typical of contemporary jazz: various melodies played simultaneously, complex percussions, and dissonant notes. My wife tells me that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who love this kind of music and those who tolerate it.

I am in the first category. In my more extravagant moments I think that everybody in the world should listen to jazz fifteen minutes a day as a kind of spiritual discipline. It would help train our ears to hear the many voices of the world in an open-minded way without reducing them to our own. My wife, however, is in the second category. She teasingly says that whenever she hears an improvisational jazz solo it makes her want to slap somebody. "It goes on and on forever without ever achieving resolution." I tell her that she should avoid jazz concerts and that it is all right just to think about the idea of jazz.

By jazz, then, I mean two things. I mean the sounds of jazz as enjoyed by some people in the world, and I mean the idea of jazz as it can be reflected upon, even by people who do not like to listen to it. For those who enjoy the sounds, the sounds are like the waters of the Ganges for a Hindu. You can be immersed in them again and again, and feel cleaned out and more alive every time. For others, though, the waters are far too cold to enjoy. My point is that even the others can learn from the idea of jazz.

Consider, for example, the idea of performing jazz. It is a lot like the idea of a sustainable community. It is the idea of people getting together, each with a different voice, sharing in one another's feelings, and seeing if they can work together to help create something beautiful. They take delight in their different voices; they agree to "hang in there" together even when things may seem to fall apart; and they forgive one another their mistakes. They have respect for the past but are willing to improvise and add new ideas, because they are sensitive to the call of each moment. They trust in the availability of fresh possibilities.

Advocates of Whitehead's philosophy believe that the world would be a better place if we all imagined ourselves inside this concert. Of course we might not call it a concert. If we are Christians, Jews, or

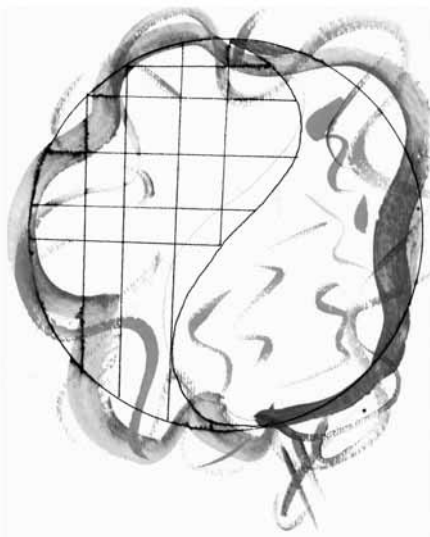
Muslims we might call it "the continuing creation." If we are evolutionary biologists we might call it "the evolving whole." If we live in China we might call it the "continuous creativity of Ten Thousand Things." In any case we would see the hills, rivers, animals and trees as adding their unique voices to a larger whole. We would know that our lives are our instruments and the decisions we make, moment by moment, are the notes that we play. We would recognize that our calling in life is not to isolate ourselves from the wider world but to add beauty to the whole, each in our own ways. And we would realize that, if we are to respond to this calling, we must be flexible and adaptive, grateful for the past but not stuck in it.

### **Priesthood of all Listeners**

What, then, might it be like to live in this flexible and adaptive way? Process theologians, influenced by Whitehead's philosophy, have many ways of describing it. Many if not most process theologians identify themselves as Christian; but some are Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Daoist, and Confucian. And some are spiritually-interested but not religiously-affiliated. Let me describe a way from a Christian perspective.

Imagine that you are a Christian and that you go to Mary's Piano Bar in Philadelphia on a Saturday night. A pianist, bass player, and drummer are playing a jazz standard, each improvising during a solo. Mary is the pianist. You are absorbed in their music and also mesmerized by the way they interact with each other. Often they close their eyes but still seem to feel one another's presence. They hear the notes being played, but also feel the feelings of one another. In feeling one another's moods they are living examples of what process theologians call "experience in the mode of causal efficacy." They are individuals, to be sure, but they are also composed of one another. They are a community.

It occurs to you that you would like to live this way, too. Sometimes you lean too heavily in the direction of Western individualism. You equate individualism with self-enclosure, forgetting that you yourself feel most alive when you are connected with others. You would



*Right-Brain*

like to be composed to the feelings of others and to respond to them in creative yet sympathetic ways. You are reminded of Paul's idea in the Bible that an authentic gathering of Christians is a society of spiritual friends in which people share in one another's joys and sufferings. You come to see Mary's jazz ensemble as a vivid example of what Paul means by "church" and wonder if the spirit of the music isn't their way of experiencing the living Christ.

As you watch them, you also wonder what the musicians are like as individuals. You know that they bring with them years of training in music and, for that matter, years of life experience. You can see it in their eyes. But somehow, even as they bring the past with them, they live in the present, where the music is. You would like to live in the present, too. Often you find yourself clinging to the past even though it has passed away, or clinging to the future even though it has not yet arrived. Your friends tell you that you are sometimes distracted and unable to listen to them, because you are too often preoccupied with other matters. You want to become a better listener. You want to be more open to the sacrament of the present moment.

You worry, though, that if you truly became more open to the present moment, you might lose something important. You do not want to neglect your responsibilities for the past or your responsibilities to the future. The jazz concert reminds you that this present moment is never isolated. It includes the past as remembered and the future as anticipated. How else could the musicians remember the jazz standards? How else could they build upon what was played a minute earlier?

Equally important, how else could they anticipate what to play next? The future is in the moment as a possibility even as it is more than the moment. You are intrigued by the way they anticipate the future in their improvisational solos. They are making it up as they go. They are open to fresh possibilities. You ask Mary how she knows what notes to play. She puts it very simply: "I trust in the Music."

As she says this, it dawns on you that trusting in Music is a lot like trusting in God. Music can be inside you and outside you at

the same time. You cannot grasp it as an object in space but you can feel its presence and be nourished by it. It can inspire you with its comforting melodies but also challenge you to widen your horizons. You can move with it and dance in its presence but you cannot own it as your possession, because it belongs to other people, too. You begin to wonder if Music wouldn't be a better name for God than "God."

The Bible offers you support. You know that the Gospel of John speaks of God as a Word that became flesh in Jesus. You know that the word "Word" is an English translation of the word Logos and that some people think it is not a very good one. You have been told that Logos means something like the creative spirit of the divine reality at work in the world. Maybe the Logos is not a sentence uttered in a human language, much less a sentence written in a book. Maybe it is more like live Music. We might call it the Song of the Universe. And maybe we can hear this Song as it is sounds in the voices of others and as it speaks to us in the still small voice of our hearts, but maybe we can also add to it with our own actions. Maybe we are part of the Music even as it is also more than us.

This gives us new eyes for music itself. For many people in the world it functions as a sacrament. Christians speak of being immersed in the waters of baptism once in their lives. The customers in Mary's Piano Bar are immersed in the waters of live jazz. Jazz is their baptism or, perhaps better, their Eucharist. They experience the real presence of the divine reality through the real presence of rhythm, melody, and harmony. The musicians are their priests, but the customers are also priests to the musicians, because the experience depends on all of them.

Mary puts it this way: "When we are really playing well, our playing is inspired by everyone in the bar. My fingers move to the Music but they are moved by the man sitting on the front row and the woman sitting to my right. I am listening to the other musicians, but I am also aware of their listening, and their listening inspires my playing." Mary believes in the priesthood of all listeners.

### Whitehead's Cosmology

The way of living described above—a way of listening and responding—is grounded in the philosophy of Whitehead. My illustration shows how it might be appropriated by a Christian; but the way can well be described in other religious terms. At this point it may be helpful to give readers a sense of its general tone, which relies on Whitehead's cosmology.

Put simply, Whitehead pictures the whole of reality on the analogy of an improvisational jazz concert. He imagines the universe as an ongoing act of creative improvisation and he proposes that each actual entity in the universe is a moment in the flow. This means that reality is akin to live music. It is not solid and unchanging like a rock. It is instead flowing like a river.

For Whitehead even rocks are flowing at the microscopic levels. The molecules and atoms that compose rocks are dances of energy never quite the same at any two instants. Thus Whitehead speaks in ways that resemble Buddhism with its doctrine of impermanence. Whenever we look deeply into something, we do not find something solid and unchanging. We find flow.

Of course the flow of the universe is patterned flow. Whitehead was a philosopher of science and he knew that all entities—atoms and molecules, hills and rivers, people and stars—behave in law-like ways that can be understood scientifically. But he did not see the laws of nature as templates imposed on the universe from afar. Instead he saw them as habits of behavior that emerged within nature in the remote past and that now have a power of their own.

The laws of nature are like jazz standards; and every event in the universe plays one or another of these standards. The most general standards are played by all entities and they have no choice in the matter. But every event plays the standard in its own unique way adding its own voice. All apples may fall from trees but no two apples fall in exactly the same way. We live in a universe that is both structured and creative.

One of our most important tasks as human beings is to listen to the voices of others in an

open-minded way and respond with loving-kindness. We see this kind of listening in the pianist as she listens to the voices of the drummer, the bass player, and the saxophonist. She can express her own voice, but she also takes delight in other voices. She enjoys the familiar melodies of the standards they play, but she also enjoys novelty and surprise. She does not hide from dissonant chords but also carries the hope that at least some of those dissonances can be resolved into wider harmonies. The need in our time is for people to learn to listen in this open-minded way. At least this is the kind of listening that is needed if we are to develop sustainable communities. I conclude, then, by offering a Whiteheadian approach to sustainability.

### Sustainability

From a Whiteheadian perspective sustainable communities can be households, farms, neighborhoods, workplaces, classrooms, villages, cities, or nations. They are sustainable to the degree that they are creative, compassionate, equitable, participatory, respectful of diversity, ecologically wise, and spiritually satisfying, with no one left behind. In other words, they are sustainable in two senses. They can be sustained into the indefinite future given the limits of Earth to absorb pollution and supply resources. And they provide material and spiritual nourishment—sustenance—for human beings in community with one another and Earth. Spiritual nourishment occurs when people have roots and wings.

"Roots" is a metaphor for the security, stability, and balance that people experience when they belong to healthy communities and places. The communities can be families, villages, regions, ethnic groups, religions, or nations—or some combination. Most of us are rooted in several communities simultaneously. We can be rooted in the mutuality of family life, in the customs of our culture, in the workplace, in the ideals of our nation, and in the teachings of a religious tradition or spiritual practice. Even as we might be anchored in relations with people, we can also be anchored in places: that is, the natural and built landscapes of our environments. These can be the moun-

tains and rivers of a village where we live, or the parks and neighborhood stores of our urban neighborhood, or the comfort of our apartment with its seating arrangements and décor. When these communities and places are combined they form what people call home. Home is a place where a person lives; it is a community to which one belongs; and it is a place in the heart.<sup>3</sup>

“Wings” is a metaphor for adventure, creativity, exploration, and hope. Even as we might benefit from stable relations with others, we also need to enjoy a sense of novelty, a sense of hope, a sense that the future can be different from the past. Even healthy relations can grow stale if they do not have novelty. At a personal level the need for novelty is felt as an indwelling lure to grow intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. There lies within each person an inner desire to become more wise and more compassionate, and thus more complete or whole as a human being. At a social level the need for novelty can take the form of working with others to help create healthier and more just communities: communities where people have adequate health care and sanitation, where the poor are no longer poor.

It is difficult to know which is more powerful in human life: the need for roots or wings. Certainly the need for adventure does not replace the need for home. Particularly in times of trial, people turn to what is familiar and predictable. But there is also a need for newness, for variety, for differences. Healthy relationships can grow stale if change does not occur. Humans need familiarity, but we also need surprise. We need order, but we need a little chaos, too.

One thing is clear, though. In modern times many people feel frustrated by two undesirable options, one of which offers wings without roots and the other of which offers roots without wings. The first option is a rootless consumerism in which the purpose of life is reduced to acquiring more and more material possessions and the prestige they offer. The second is wingless fundamentalism in which the purpose of life is reduced to repeating the customs and values of the past, at the expense of being open to new ideas and experiences.

The need for sustainability originates with the need to find a way past these two undesirable options: a way with roots and wings.

As humans find their way with roots and wings, it is important to remember that the other living beings, too, need and deserve the benefits of a sustainable future. We live in a world of Ten Thousand Sounds. This takes me back to where this essay started, with a word about animals. Not only does Earth need us to live within its own limits to absorb pollution and supply resources, but other animals need respect and kindly treatment as well. Indeed, they need for us to help enjoy the fruits of sustenance. From a Whiteheadian perspective, animals, too, have their relationship with the Listening and the Lure, with the Yin and Yang of the universe, with the Calling and Empathy of God. God is within each animal as a lure to live with satisfaction and God shares in, and is widened by, the beauty of animals’ lives and voices. God would be less “God” were it not for the animals.

In relation to wild animals, our task is to listen to their needs with help from science and aesthetics, and then to make sure that there is space for them to flourish in the habitats appropriate to their natures. This means the provision of wild spaces in rural and urban settings. In relation to animals upon whose lives we intervene in more direct ways—companion animals and farm animals, for example—this means kindly treatment and respect. It also means recognizing that they are means of grace in human life: that is, places where our own sense of companionship and beauty is widened to include what is more than human and thus more than us. Animals become a place where we discover transcendence: the transcendence of the universe and the transcendence of the divine Listening. In the beginning is this Listening, but in the end as well. And in the Listening the voices of animals have a prominent role. A sustainable future is one in which we hear those voices as part of a larger music in which we, too, participate. One way in which our ears can be trained for this hearing—but not the only way—is through fifteen minutes of Miles Davis every morning.

<sup>3</sup> Of course not all homes are healthy. We can live in a village but not be at home in it. We can spend our waking hours in a workplace but feel alienated from the work we are doing. We can go home at night to our apartment but be in tension with the other members of our family. We can be born into a culture that is filled with violence and arrogance that seeps into our souls. We can be citizens of nations that have imperialistic ambitions on others. We can belong to religions that stifle creativity and try to dominate others. In short, we can be alienated. This alienation is itself a teaching. Like physical pain, it can tell us that that we are in the presence of something that is hazardous to our health and the health of the communities in which we live. Thus a distinction can be drawn between healthy homes in which we truly feel at home because they are hospitable and compassionate, and other kinds of homes which are inhospitable or even oppressive. A healthy home—whether it is a family or a culture or a nation—has two qualities. It is a home amid which there is some degree of mutuality, a sharing in a common destiny, such that its participants feel bonded in a community that makes the whole of their lives richer. And it is a home in which the wing side of life—the creative and free side of life—is encouraged and nourished. In such a home, the community is a context for creativity. The roots give rise to wings.