

## BECOMING ECOCENTRIC

By Liz Hosken

The protea grasslands which nurtured me into existence, just outside Johannesburg in South Africa, no longer exist. The house and the twenty-five acres of wild land and farmland which were home to me were bulldozed flat in order to make way for the concrete foundations of a “secure townhouse project.” The rare indigenous trees, bulbs, grasses, and bushes, which my father had painstakingly searched out and cared for over many decades, together with many other species—earthworms, insects, birds, and other small animals—also lost their homes and were killed if they could not escape. This painful story of loss and destruction of home and the obliteration of memory from the land is shared by millions of humans and uncountable numbers of our relatives in the web of life. The eras of colonization and globalization sent shockwaves across our planet leaving displacement and death in their wake. These waves continue today, and the last havens are no longer safe.



Liz Hosken with women farmers from western Uganda. © The Gaia Foundation 2017, reprinted with permission.

The land that was home to me had come to be a haven over the years for many species—including humans. Activists who needed to take refuge from the apartheid regime became gardeners, or keepers of the animals on the small farm, as a cover. They called my father “the bird man,”

because he knew and loved birds and their often-quirky characters. One of my great joys was to go into what we call “the bush” birdwatching with him and (sometimes) his “birdie friends.” I enjoyed being with them because they knew lots about birds and everyone else—the animals, trees, and insects and their intricate connections, which fascinated me. And they liked me to join them because I knew how to be silent and discreet, sometimes even holding my breath with anticipation, which meant I was quick at spotting all manner of birds and other creatures. Along the trails and across the wildlands I would often go ahead as I felt the adults were too clumsy and noisy. I loved being a bit distant from them and their chatter.

These experiences embedded in me a deep feeling for the wild and the free—as if it fed my own yearning to be wild and free. I loved the flow of communication between species, and the sense of community, which was spontaneous and yet orderly. Wherever we went—be it riverine areas, marshes, or game reserves in Southern Africa—there was that sense of us entering a community. It was as if all beings there were speaking to one another—when we humans came there would be a flutter of concern, as if all were asking “are these ones okay or are they dangerous?” Once they assessed this, it felt as if everyone went back to their own business, albeit with a certain alertness because you never know with humans, they can turn at any moment.

My parents, thankfully, were involved in establishing the first Rudolf Steiner School in Johannesburg, and I was in the first batch of nursery schoolchildren. The Steiner approach is true to *educere* (one of the Latin roots of education)—it aims “to draw out” the innate wisdom in children. Teachers encourage children to follow their interests and inspirations, and mine was playing freely outdoors, on the farm or in the bush.

Overshadowing this wondrous natural world was a heavy dark energy of human minds and hearts obsessed with those who had a different colour skin. The assumptions of power and hierarchy that lie behind the belief that humans with lighter skin were superior to those with darker skin were applied to all other creatures, indeed to Earth herself. As we are bearing witness today, the toxic mix of these beliefs and the industrial endless-growth economy legitimized the plundering of our beautiful Earth. During the “struggle years” of resisting South Africa’s apartheid regime, it felt to me as if this were a rehearsal for a much bigger struggle—a microcosm of what would unfold (and was unfolding) across our planet.

I was blessed to grow up with parents who were themselves grappling with the insanity of the dominant thinking and its systems. My mother was involved in “The Black Sash,” a women’s movement challenging the apartheid regime in various ways, including by lining the streets dressed in black in order to witness and mourn the immoral apartheid system (Mary Burton, *The Black Sash*, 2016). At an early age I was also introduced to the classics of the ecological movement—from Rachel Carson’s chilling *Silent Spring* (1962), to Ivan Illich’s incisive critiques and proposals, such as *Deschooling Society* (1971) and many others. These helped me to feel there was a stream of thought to tap into and draw solace from.

By the time I was eighteen years old I felt I could see what needed to be done and believed that it was only a matter of time before things would change for the better. I decided to create a more holistic environmental studies course than was on offer, and fortunately Pietermaritzburg University was small and flexible enough to accommodate me. However, I was disillusioned to find that the teaching methodology was infused with the superiority complex which underpins the dominant industrial world. Did they really believe by dissecting a frog you would get to know him or her? And did they really think it was okay to butcher twenty frogs daily for zoology students to cut up as if in a morgue? This was barbaric to me. I soon learned that this way of thinking was so institutionalized that a few lone voices would not change it. My naïve clarity at eighteen crumbled, and I began to wrestle with the question of how systems change.

The immediacy of the horrors of the injustices wrought upon the majority in South Africa pulled me more deeply into the struggle against apartheid. But after some years I had to make a tough decision and leave my homeland. This was a shocking experience as my roots were deeply connected to the African soil. However, as I explored the island known as “The United Kingdom,” I found more wild places than I had expected—the Western Isles, the Scilly Isles, the Welsh coast—and I experienced the beauty of Mother Earth’s expression in a totally different way.

Here, off the coast of Wales, I met one of my great teachers, Simo the dolphin, before he became famous amongst humans and disappeared. For some years I would pilgrimage to meet with him regularly. There is so much I could share, but most important is simply the experience of being with a being with a much greater consciousness than my own.

I knew Simo could read my mood and what I was thinking, just as he could do with other humans. He behaved differently with each person who met him and swam with him, giving each ‘the medicine’ he or she needed. I had moments of deep connection and intimacy with him where we would lie together in the water, as he drew me into what was for me an altered state of consciousness. For him it was the way he was. There were other moments where he could feel my ego getting out of hand as I introduced him proudly to friends, and he came over and flipped me deep into the water with his tail fin. Simo, and other animal teachers, showed me clearly that humans are certainly not the consciousness of the Earth, as some would claim.

I also met some important human mentors in the 1980s when people were gathering across our planet to reflect on four decades of “development” and how social and ecological injustices were getting worse. It was in these gatherings that I met more of what I call my spirit family. Wangari Maathai from Kenya became a close sister; Jose “Lutz” Lutzenberger, later recognized as the father of the Brazilian environmental movement, was a very important mentor for me; Joanna Macy, who connects many worlds in powerful and practical heart–mind shifting ways; Jules Cashford, who brings together the perennial wisdom across cultures; Ed Posey, another connector of people and places, who later co-founded the Gaia Foundation with me and others (see [www.gaiafoundation.org](http://www.gaiafoundation.org)). Through Lutz, as he was fondly known, the Gaia Foundation’s first phase was to unfold in the Amazon Rainforest with Indigenous communities. This laid the basis for my own path and that of the Foundation going forward.

In Brazil I met Ailton Krenak, a fiercely outspoken Indigenous leader who introduced me to many Indigenous traditions and their profound relationship with the land from which they were born and the forces that animate life. He spoke poetically about the memory Indigenous people hold of how humans need to participate consciously within the web of life to live according to Mother Earth’s laws. He emphasized the importance of building “affectionate alliances” between Indigenous peoples and others from the dominant world who are concerned about the critical condition of life on our planet. Hearing this was like a homecoming for me. It gave me hope that this memory of who we are—Earthlings amongst others—could be revived, even in European cultures. After all, it was they who once knew Mother Earth as Gaia, the “foundation of all life” (*Homeric Hymns*, trans. Jules Cashford, 2003).

Ailton also introduced me to the Asháninka Indigenous community in Acre, in the northwest Brazilian Amazon, who invited me to participate in their regular Ayahuasca ceremonies where I met the world of plant teachers for the first time. This too was an experience of connecting to the consciousness that permeates life, the place to which Simo had taken me. What an awesome planet where these extraordinary plant and animal relatives have such wisdom to share with us if we are open to it! I wished for a way to get more humans to have this experience—to get a perspective on ourselves and our place in this beautiful universe.

My next place of learning was with Indigenous peoples in the Colombian Amazon who were on a journey of reviving their knowledge and traditions, which had been shattered by traders and missionaries over decades. I was privileged to accompany them, together with Colombian ethnologist Martín von Hildebrand, for some years. Their priority was to revive the rituals required in their sacred natural sites in order to reconnect with those sites and the energies of the forest. They emphasized the urgency of protecting these sites across our planet, which are like a network of acupuncture points playing a vital role in maintaining her health and integrity. This opened up a whole new world to me—another dimension of the way in which matter and spirit interact. After decades of hard work, they have gained legal recognition for Indigenous governance of an area of rainforest larger than the UK rooted in their traditional spiritual leadership and affirming the continuity of their ancestral path (Sánchez, 2018). This journey showed me that it is possible for Earth-centred cultures to revive and sustain their lifeways and inspire the transformation that is required of all humans now.

It was at this time, in the early 2000s, that I was fortunate to spend time with another important mentor, cultural historian Thomas Berry. Announcing the inevitable demise of the industrial growth system and the vital need to shift from the dominant human-centred way of seeing to an Earth-centred understanding of who we are, he spoke and wrote with the knowing of an elder. He called for a radical change in the industrial conception of law to an Earth jurisprudence, recognizing the laws of the Earth as the “primary text” (Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, 1999). Indigenous peoples, Berry said, are an inspiration for this as they consciously derive their customary laws from the laws of nature. This resonated with my own experience and added an important dimension in challenging all the institutions of the dominant growth economy in

order to transform them and restore a mutually enhancing relationship with our Earth Mother.

At this point, for various reasons my focus returned to Africa, and over the last two decades I have been involved in an ongoing exploration into ways of evoking Earth-centered consciousness through reviving Africa's Indigenous knowledge and practices. Together with allies, we at the Gaia Foundation developed a series of experiential learning processes, including a three-year training for Earth jurisprudence practitioners. Learning from Indigenous ways, core practices that we encourage include strengthening our relationship with the wider Earth Community; strengthening our relationship with ancestors or the spiritual domain; going back to roots by learning from knowledgeable elders; and accompanying communities on a path of revival inspired by the Colombian Amazonians and connecting up to other social movements.

What gives me hope, despite the daily news of the continued displacement and destruction of the biosphere, and the speed of the "great unravelling" of life (Joanna Macy, *Coming Back to Life*, 1998), is the joy and liberation that radiates from those who have remembered and reconnected to who we really are—Earthlings inextricably born of and sustained by the web of life. And what I have learned so far is that this path of becoming ecocentric is a lifelong journey of becoming human. Just like a seed, we are born with all the potential, but the conditions in which the seed grows will influence its expression.