

## The Hills Are Alive: *Spell of the Sensuous* Makes Nature's Song More Audible

By Alice Loyd

As we entered the new millennium, we could assess the previous century's environmental movement as only a beginning. The secular arguments for environmental responsibility had not changed people's behavior, and religion, for the most part, reflected rather than challenged the prevailing culture as regards our relationship with the natural world. I've wished that environmentalists would see spiritual roots in their devotion to Earth, and the religious community would find nature at the heart of its worship. I have prayed for a marriage of matter and spirit in both camps, and in small ways I see it happening. There are signs of early courtship, at least, with a few shy smiles each direction.

*The Spell of the Sensuous*, a book by David Abram published in 1996, struck me on sight as a facilitator for the match. Writing about sensate experience, Abram uses magic as the introduction to his analysis. He says human relations with the non-human world depend upon whether we

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perceive the landscape with spiritual content—a position familiar to readers of Thomas Berry. An American with a Ph.D. in phenomenology, Abram financed his education by working as a sleight-of-hand magician. During performances he observed that his audience saw what they expected to see. When they believed he was about to draw a coin from mid-air, they saw it done, although the actual event proceeded in a different way.

The spiritual and material aspects of experience came together for him while he lived in Indonesia and Nepal as an itinerant magician. Support for the travel came from a grant to study the relationship between magic and medicine among traditional sorcerers and shamans. As he came to villages in remote areas, his magic tricks showed local sorcerers that he had at least “rudimentary skill in altering the common field of perception.” As a result, he was “invited in homes, asked to share secrets with them, and eventually encouraged, even urged, to participate in various rituals and ceremonies”

(p.5)\* While living several years in that milieu, he managed to shed the westerner's experiential distance from nature.

### Immersion in the Living Landscape

His research gradually shifted toward a “deeper pondering of the relationship between traditional magic and the animate natural world.” He came to see the primacy of non-human nature for the indigenous magician. “Countless anthropologists have managed,” he says, “to overlook the ecological dimension of the shaman's craft, while writing at great length of the shaman's rapport with ‘supernatural entities.’” He attributes this oversight to the western view that whatever lies beyond laboratory-type analysis must be “of some other, nonphysical realm above nature, ‘supernatural,’” and that nature is a “a rather prosaic and predictable realm, unsuited to such mysteries.”

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He saw, however, that the shaman's connections—by dwelling site, activity and attention—were more with wilderness than with the village served. In the forest the shaman worked to acquire nature's frame of reference, and the magic, or healing, was accomplished by strengthening that perception in the people. Abram observed how daily custom and local language supported such an awareness. The landscape was an element of every event.

During the years of the project he came to live in the buoyancy of that perspective—and lost the ability as he re-entered his U.S. lifestyle. The loss prompted him to seek out the causes and a cure for western blindness to full reality. Because I've had that same objective for several years, I came to this reading with high interest. I was asking as I began the book, “How can I help others see the aliveness in nature?” Midway through, my question became, “What can I do to enhance my own seeing?”

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\* *Editor's note:* All page numbers cited refer to David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: First Vintage Book Edition, 1997). When a page is identified for one quote and the following quotes are from the same page, the page reference is not repeated.

## Written Language Seen as the Agent of Alienation

While Abram acknowledges more than one factor in the decline of respect for other species, his subject is the effect of written language. Against the background of the enchanted forest, he shows how the alphabet and written speech allowed humans to feel superior, forgetting their dependency on nature. While spoken language mimicked animal cues, and pictographs demonstrated nature's powers, writing seemed to invent a realm exclusively human. With it, thought obtained the ability to leave the body, conceiving of itself as a separate entity—as a thing that could replace things and even transcend them.

From the Hebrew “aleph-beth” marks through the Greek scribes’ insertion of vowels, he shows the progression of scholarship and custom toward pure abstraction. A non-physical realm became the ideal world, not just for religion but for science, too. Where physically-based knowledge persisted among the common people, it was denounced as heresy and punished nearly to extinction.



For me, his appraisal of the role of the Hebrews was a highlight. In this treatment of the topic, it isn't the Genesis creation account that is faulted as Hebrew influence is reviewed. In fact, Abram has a good understanding of that tradition's fluid, non-literal posture toward scripture's meaning. He shows how the absence of vowels calls for continual reinterpretation by the reader, with the chance to bring forth meaning that has never before been encountered. Each master's investment is preserved as sacred text, with the result that a parallel scripture grows, generation by generation.

While Abram praises the Hebrews in this respect, he finds less to admire in our legacy from the Greeks. They are the ones, he says, who set out to be free of Earth's restraints, moving Christendom along with formal learning into ethereality. The Hebrews looked for paradise on Earth, but Christians, under Greek influence, removed it to a groundless “heaven.” He sees Socrates as the leader in the dual feat involved in the transition. Socrates belittled nature as insensate and unsacred, and prodded his disciples into detachment. “I am a lover of learning,” Abrams quotes Socrates as saying, “and trees and open country won't teach me anything” (p. 102).

He is aware of the powerful oral tradition in Greece that would seem to preclude such a posture. He writes, “It is difficult to reconcile Socrates’ assertion—that trees and the untamed country have nothing to teach—with the Greece that we have come to know through Homer’s epic ballads. In the Homeric songs the natural landscape itself bears the omens and signs that instruct human beings.” He believes the written speech that the Greeks developed out of the Hebrew alphabet removed the link to this instruction. It did so by inserting vowels, which nailed onto the page rigid definitions, standing in merely for themselves rather than for natural phenomena. Human-created phonetic sounds took on meaning apart from the setting, and literalism succeeded representationalism as language’s function.

Self-objectification is a corollary to objectification of the universe, as Socrates knew and implemented in his teaching method. Employing exercises that overcame his students’ resistance to the process, he instituted “mental patterns or thought styles that today we of literate culture take for granted.” Abram attributes to Eric Havelock the suggestion that the “Socratic dialectic” was primarily a method for disrupting the mimetic thought patterns of oral culture. In it students were forced, in Abrams’ words, “to separate themselves . . . from the phrases and formulas that had become habitual through the . . . constant repetition of traditional teaching stories . . . By continually asking his interlocutors to repeat and explain what they had said in other words, by getting them thus to listen to and ponder their own speaking, Socrates stunned his listeners out of the mnemonic trance demanded by orality, and hence out of the sensuous, storied realm to which they were accustomed” (p. 109).

Of course for people with an aptitude for mental activity, the realm of the mind offers its own consolation. Most readers of this journal may have survived by having that place of retreat. The head is the safer region when things physical are under threat, and for a child, it can be the refuge that preserves a sense of dignity. To read Abram’s book, in fact, a person would have to enjoy scholarly analysis. I kept thinking as I turned the pages, “How ironic. The habit of mind that

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## **A Philosophical Posture That Restores Unity**

We cannot cure present-day detachment by abandoning the alphabet, however, or by ceasing to think in abstractions—and Abram doesn’t take that route. On the contrary, he makes the case that thinkers, and phenomenologists in particular, have offered us the logic to make the transition. He draws from three whose work provides philosophical basis for seeing nature’s sentience: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger.

Edmund Husserl launched phenomenology in the early 1900’s as a corrective to psychology, which by then had decided to do quantifiable science, with the mind as its object. He set out, in Abram’s words, “not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience” (p.35). In his efforts to say how the self experiences other selves who are experiencing, he came to the body—“as a singularly important structure within the phenomenal field” (p.37).

He began to discern the affinity between experiencing bodies, and to distinguish between experiences confined to the inside of one of the subjects and experiences they share. These classes of experience he came to call, respectively, subjective and intersubjective phenomena. Abram describes the first as “phenomena that unfold entirely for me—images that arise, as it were, on this side of my body,” referring to fantasies, fears and dreamings (p.38). The second class includes everything else, not excepting what Abram calls the “so-called objective world of science.” Objectivity has been reframed here as a category of subjectivity. Abram writes, “The striving for objectivity is thus understood, phenomenologically, as a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects, rather than as an attempt to avoid subjectivity altogether.” Eventually he called the web of interconnected perceptions “the life-world,” which Abram describes as “the world of our immediately lived experience, *as we live it*, prior to all our thoughts about it” (p.40).

Abram writes, “Oblivious to the quality-laden life-world upon which they themselves depend for their own meaning and existence, the Western sciences, and the technologies that accompany them, were beginning to

blindly overrun the experiential world—even, in their errancy, threatening to obliterate the world-of-life entirely” (p.41). At the end of his life Husserl wrote in notes, “*Overthrow of the Copernican Theory . . . The original ark, earth, does not move*” (p.42). He was not saying that the scheme of planets was mistaken, but rather that the scheme throws the mind into a quandary to which no wing of science was attending. Abram explains the conflict in these words: “The theory did not agree with our spontaneous sensory *perception*, which remained the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth. A profound schism was thus brought about between our intellectual convictions and the most basic conviction of our sense, between our mental *concepts* and our bodily *percepts*.”

“The earth is thus, for Husserl,” Abram says, “the secret depth of the life-world. It is the most unfathomable region of experience, an enigma that exceeds the structurations of any particular culture or language. In his words, the Earth is the encompassing ‘ark of the world,’ the common ‘root basis’ of all relative life-worlds” (p.43). Finally, in Abram’s words, “Husserl’s writings seem to suggest the life-world has various layers, that underneath the layer of the diverse cultural life-worlds there reposes a deeper, more unitary life-world, always already there beneath all our cultural acquisitions, a vast and continually overlooked dimension of experience that nevertheless supports and sustains all our diverse and discontinuous worldviews” (p.41).

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In the 1960’s Maurice Merleau-Ponty set out to clarify inconsistencies left by Husserl’s progression and to create clear language for the discipline. He rejected entirely the notion of a transcendental ego, instead identifying the experiencing self with the bodily organism. Abram expresses the position in three separate statements: (i) “if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience—then the body itself is the true subject of experience” (p.45). (ii) “To acknowledge that ‘I am this body’ is not to reduce the mystery of my yearning and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my ‘self’ to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form” (p.46). (iii) “Ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth’s animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence” (p.47).

Merleau-Ponty chose the words *sentient* and *sensible* to name the sensor and the sensed. He does not view the sensed, or sensible, as passive, however, but as lending itself to be sensed. He sees sensation as a communication as well as a connection between bodies of various kinds. An experience is a “reciprocal encounter,” in which “blue” comes forward to me and I go out toward it as we meet. “*Only by affirming the animate-ness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world*” (p.56).

Merleau-Ponty died in 1961 in the middle of a work he named *The Visible and the Invisible*. In it he conceived of an “elemental power that has had no name in the entire history of Western philosophy.” He called it “The Flesh,” saying that it includes both our flesh and “the flesh of the world.” Abram says it is “the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity.” Due to this theory, Abram says, “I find myself forced to acknowledge that any visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me” (p.66).

## **The Landscape of Indigenous Cultures**

In surveying phenomenological thought, Abram is providing logical justification for the concepts of preliterate cultures, which are his true interest from the first chapter forward. Through published studies, he helps us to see the landscape as these groups have seen it, describing the Aztecs (p.133), the Amahuaca Indians in Peru (p.141), the Koyukon Indians of Alaska (p.145), the Western Apache (p.154), the Aboriginal peoples of Australia (p.163), the Navajo (p.190), and the Hopi (p.192). From both hemispheres, in separate ages, and regarding languages descended from different linguistic ancestry, he offers modes of seeing that stand in remarkable agreement with each other, and in radical contrast to our own.

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Partly through presenting in detail the animated Earth of their experience, he brings these alternative views into believability. He is an artist when depicting the environment, as they have known it, painting a world far richer than mine has yet become. Through extensive scenes, statements and narratives, he makes this new perspective more accessible. When I could shift

into a belief system in which nature's extension of itself toward me was ever present, the reassurance I felt was indeed magical. This support may be what the environmental movement has needed. To advocate for the Earth may require relying on it for guidance.

The landscape that he paints is luminous, but it is grounded in physical sensation. The means of access to nature's consciousness is the body, as Abrams says, our eyes, our ears, and our feet. It is no filmy, sentimental version of reality, and the reason it might seem so is due to cultural perspective. As Abram said about the credulous posture that magicians are able to encourage in their audiences, we see what we expect. Accordingly I can assume that expectations might prevent my seeing any fact. To employ my senses to their potential, I may need a belief system that supports their full functioning—one that sees the physical plane as sentient.

Abram views this correction as our salvation. To emerge from the current environmental dilemma, he says, we must discard the habits of mind that got us there. These viewpoints, he maintains, were at least partly obtained through abandoning oral culture in favor of writing. He recognizes the tremendous asset that written speech has been, while at the same time lamenting its cost. He says, "By focusing on the written word, I have wished to demonstrate less a particular thesis than a particular stance, a particular way of pondering and of questioning *any* factor that one might choose" (p.264).

### **Going Forward by Reclaiming a Lost Capacity**

The remedy that he proposes is that we begin to sense, once again, everything we encounter every moment of our lives. An exercise especially helpful to me involved learning to feel the previously unfelt air in which we move. Discerning its presence, I realized in a new way that what I don't see is not nothing. I call this encounter a remedy because it puts me in contact with nature's agency. Doing it, I find that nature knows me as its own, producing healing at a level beyond cognition. I observe and sense rather than comprehend such a balm—an experience of the kind he says is essential. In other words, the only way to perceive my unity with the landscape may be to let my body experience it. My mind may then follow a bit, giving me glimpses of the benefit.



Abram avoids the word “spirit” altogether, as far as I can recall, but he describes a quality in matter that exceeds what we usually think of as physicality. Conversely, for him the human mind is as physical as the rest of the body. Nature is what we have in our moment of life, because it is what we are. Our thoughts are out of “nature” as much as our conduct or emotions. For earthlings, Earth is all we can know, perceptually speaking—and perception is the only way we have of knowing anything.

Words like these have stimulated volumes in argument, and no Westerner can easily grasp their meaning. Most of the human race has understood as fact the perceptions of which Abrams writes, however, and only when they became unintelligible did humans begin to plot their own extinction. Now our perceptual incapability leads to global warming and species loss, threatening survival in every region. Thomas Berry says *The Spell of the Sensuous* “should be one of the most widely read and discussed books of our time,” and it seems that only words as strange as Abrams’ might offer sufficient redress.

His words challenge our assumptions, yes, but they are also strangely familiar. At some level have we not spoken like this ourselves? The help Abram offers is where we have always found it—in every breath, every tree, each clod of dirt and each drop of water. Before I read the book I had seen the universe as sensate and communicative, and David Abram tells me how my suspicion rings true. He adds detail to the New Story of the Ecozoic movement, extending into our era the ancient tales of every region. Illuminating a landscape we love already, he reveals this illumination as an agent of its own renewal. His accomplishment here is not just to describe, though, but also to instruct. He tells the story, he gives us ways to understand it, and he offers a logic for its promulgation.