

Knowing Earth as a Living Being

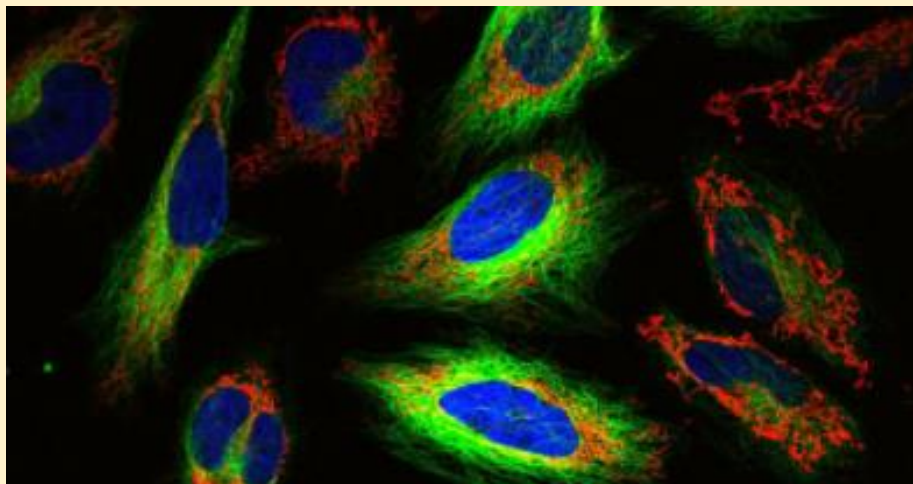
Living as Cells within the Body of Earth

Susan Meeker-Lowry

I met Thomas Berry for the first time in the 1980s at a conference at the Chinook Learning Community on Whidbey Island in Washington State (now the Whidbey Institute). It was my first trip outside of New England and I had just started publishing my newsletter, *Catalyst*, which focused on community-based economics. My passion ultimately took me deeper into what I called Gaian Economics, and meeting Thomas played a key role in the evolution of my work. During his presentation, Thomas mentioned James Lovelock's Gaia Hypothesis. I knew of it, of course, but the way he spoke shifted my understanding and confirmed my own experiences. Anyone who has known Thomas or heard him speak, knows how he communicated not just with words but with his very being. What I understood in that moment, and what I shared during the Q&A session after his talk, was this: If the Earth is alive and not just a living system as Lovelock posited, but alive, sentient, and conscious like we are, then just as a child deprived of love can heal and thrive when given love and nurturing, so can Earth! Therefore, loving Earth matters and we can help it heal! When Thomas heard this, he smiled, and his eyes sparkled.

A few years later, after my book, *Economics as if the Earth Really Mattered*, was published (Thomas wrote the Foreword), I was in New York City for an event. Kirkpatrick Sale invited me to dinner, and he asked me if I would like to have someone join us. Naturally, my choice was Thomas Berry. At that time he was working on *The Dream of the Earth*. I can still see him sitting near a window in Kirkpatrick's living room, he was excited about his book that would be out soon. I remarked that humans are part of the Earth, not separate, and how important this was for me to communicate and integrate into my work.

Thomas explained that the cells in our body are made up of the same matter as the cells in all life and he used the term "biocellular knowing" to explain how we communicate with all life.



As he spoke, he drew his hand over his opposite arm and something about that gesture and his expression sent shivers up my spine. Sometimes we need new language to share what we know intuitively, and this was the gift Thomas gave me that evening. Not only did I now have those words—biocellular knowing—but something in his gesture triggered a deeper understanding.

Many years have since passed. I often wonder what Thomas would say about the numerous crises we face now. My sense is he would be realistically optimistic. And this is the task I have set for myself as well by choosing to focus my time and energy on the many positive changes and awakenings that are simmering just under the surface. In my opinion, the most important shift we can make is to know Earth as a living being. Just as the cells in my body live within the larger body that is me, we live *within* the larger body of a sentient, conscious Earth. As animist herbalist Seán Pádraig O'Donoghue said in a recent interview: "That the Earth is alive has become my primary reality," and so it has become mine as well. We are all participants, all part of this dance!

Falling in Love with Earth

For decades I have said that we need to fall in love with Earth like we love our children, our families, our friends, our lovers. As we do this over time our behavior will shift. We will make better choices because when we love someone, we do not want to hurt them. When we make mistakes—and we will because we are human—we will make amends and vow to do better because that is how we treat those we love.

Sharing stories may be our best way of communicating how living within a living being shifts our reality over time. Here's part of mine: After leaving Vermont and the world of activism in the mid-1990s to move with my youngest son to the family home in Fryeburg, Maine, to care for my disabled sister after our father had a stroke, I turned our large backyard into a garden where I grew herbs, flowers, and vegetables. The raised beds were fenced in to keep out critters, and the soil was held in place with rocks, bricks, found objects, and even cordwood. There was a center circle bordered with crystals with a hand-carved marble goddess in the middle, which I had purchased on a trip to Greece.

The garden was my sanctuary where I took my joys and hopes, my questions and uncertainties. After the devastating loss of my oldest son in 2013, I do not know how I would have survived if it hadn't been for my garden. Every plant, every creature in that garden was family. I knew them all and I have no doubt that they, in turn, knew me. The garden was the place I practiced what I was always telling others to do: "Listen to the Earth."

I remember the summer when all it did was rain (we had over eleven inches in June alone) and every day I walked the paths picking off rotted leaves and buds, my spirit as bedraggled as some of the plants looked. Then I heard someone shout "Look at me! Look at me!" I was standing in front of Monarda (bee balm), and the plants were glowing despite the gray day. Sunshine emanated from their very cells, and they beamed it at me! I realized that the plants weren't suffering as I was. They were in the moment. The Monarda was just as joyful in the rain as when the sun returned, which of course it

did eventually. Some plants did not do well that summer while others thrived, which is how it was every year regardless of the weather.

Many of my plants were perennials, and I came to know them intimately as they grew and sometimes relocated themselves. There were lessons, and there was love, and there was acceptance. In winter, when the garden gate was closed, and snow blanketed the beds, I would close my eyes, enter the garden, and walk those paths visualizing the roots of the perennials hibernating until the first warmth of spring where they would rise well before the snow melted and well before I was aware. I sent the plants love and wished them well. In spring, they greeted me as new shoots emerged from cool, damp soil, fresh and ready for a new year.

The garden taught me many things about participating with Gaia, about listening and paying attention, and most of all about trust. I learned to trust that nature seeks balance on every scale. When I paid attention—to water, to insect cycles, to who eats whom, to the play of sun and shade—I knew intuitively what to do. Sometimes it was simply to watch. Sometimes I had to act. Sometimes quickly. I learned patience as I waited for seeds to swell as the process of germination began, or to see if someone had survived the winter or the thaw/freeze cycles of early spring. Each lesson from my garden was transferable to everyday life and has served me well in countless ways.

Over the years, I have witnessed the changes humans cause as well—not just the development and destruction that is, unfortunately, considered “normal” or “progress” in our current economic paradigm, but also the long-term losses caused by climate change. When I moved to Maine, the pollinators, including bats, were plentiful. In May, when the ancient crab apple bloomed, I heard the buzzing the minute I stepped outside. I stood under the branches that arched down almost touching the ground to receive the blessing of the bees—the buzzing vibrating into every cell of my body, a healing gift. Then one year it seemed the bees had vanished. Instead of bumble bees feasting on the comfrey flowers, there was only one. The bats became fewer until they, too, disappeared. Fireflies, those magical beings seeking mates through the pattern of their flickers, became fewer. Butterflies—not just monarchs but all of them—became scarce and when one visited it was an event. Some years were better than others; some years there were more bees buzzing in the crab apple, but they’ve never returned to their earlier numbers.

That single bumble in the comfrey, that one swallowtail, the solitary firefly – I often wondered if they were lonely. If they questioned, in their own way, where everyone was. Or perhaps that is my human role—what I can do? Often people say humans are a scourge, a mistake, that Gaia would be better off without us. It’s easy to go there. But as Thomas wrote, “In the creation of the human, the universe reflects on and celebrates itself in conscious self-awareness and finds a unique fulfillment.” And Brian Swimme in *The Universe is a Green Dragon* wrote: “The universe shivers with wonder in the depths of the human . . . humans can house the tremendous beauty of Earth, of life, of the universe. We can value it, feel its grandeur.”

In the early 1980s, I saw my first clearcut in the Pacific Northwest—whole mountains were shaved. I was unprepared for this, and the pain hit me like being kicked hard in the stomach. In that moment I knew that my feeling the pain was like a safety valve for the

Earth. It was a gift I could give. I welcomed it and was grateful for it. I have felt that pain often over the years. Sometimes it brings me to my knees. Sometimes I curl up in a ball sobbing, wishing I were anywhere else. All the losses in my life—family and friends no longer here, places I’ve witnessed being destroyed by bulldozers and chainsaws, the death of my son—are all part of this huge encompassing pain born of love. When we fall in love with Earth, we open ourselves to this pain. Let us, nevertheless, do it willingly. Let us acknowledge the gift it is. And let us allow this pain to transform into actions on behalf of all our beloveds.

Our Senses are Our Superpowers

If we have a wonderful sense of the divine, it is because we live amid such awesome magnificence. If we have refinement of emotion and sensitivity, it is because of the delicacy, the fragrance, the indescribable beauty of song and music and rhythmic movement in the world about us. . . . If we have powers of imagination, these are activated by the magic display of color and sound, of form and movement, such as we observe in the clouds of the sky, the trees and bushes and flowers, the waters and the wind, the singing birds, and the movement of the great blue whale through the sea.

—Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*

After a few years of gardening and listening to the plants, I began making herbal creams, salves, body oils, and medicine cabinet staples from the herbs I grew or that grew wild nearby. This evolved into natural perfumery. Every perfume has a story—it is like painting but with fragrance. In addition to essential oils and absolutes, I make my own ingredients using herbs, resins, bark, and twigs. All the beings of Earth—soil, bark, trees, compost, fresh mown grass, flowers of course, fungi, moss, even water and wind—offer endless inspiration.

Creating beautiful fragrances feeds my spirit in ways I can’t put into words. The garden and the forest offer inspiration and provide raw materials, and the work itself is a balm. Yet in 2018 over time, my sense of smell diminished until it disappeared. I was devastated. Leaving my magical garden to new caretakers, I with my sister had just moved to New York and my plan was to focus on perfume. It took a long time to get an appointment with a specialist, but I did and thankfully my sense of smell was restored.

One of the most important gifts this painful experience has given me is an every-moment awareness of my senses, especially smell, and of how my senses inspire and enliven my body and spirit. This awareness is no longer a separate thought, it is part of living, like breathing. In our modern world where so much of our living is taken up with technology, media blaring from everywhere, feeling the need to accomplish, and a constant focus on external stuff, our senses have become dulled, even atrophied. Yet our senses are how we live within the world, they are how we learn, they are how we

participate and communicate with every living being! When we lose this awareness, we forget who we are—both as a species and as individuals—and why we are here.

Waking up to the reality of who we are and why we are here is our current task as a species and as individuals. As Thomas said so frequently: we need to recreate the human at the species level—to put ourselves back within the web of life rather than holding ourselves separate and above all the other species who live within this living planet with us. In *The Great Work*, Thomas explained that “we are that reality in whom the entire Earth comes to a special mode of reflexive consciousness. We are ourselves a mystical quality of the Earth, a unifying principle, an integration of the various polarities of the material and the spiritual, the physical and the psychic, the natural and the artistic, the intuitive and the scientific.”

We are living within a living being, Gaia, and the sensual powers we have within every cell of our body are gateways to communication and participation. As we hear, see, smell, taste, feel, intuit . . . our senses remember and grow, and we become truly human. We mature just as seeds, with sun and water and healthy soil, swell, germinate, and grow into their full potential. This is love in action. I give thanks for it, try to put words on it and share it . . . sometimes in stories, sometimes as a perfume, sometimes just looking deeply into another human’s eyes to see that love, joy, and wisdom reflected back to me . . . back to the Earth.



Lavender Field in Bloom. Robert Brink. Wikimedia

Resources used in preparing this article and for further application of its ideas:

Seán Pádraig O’Donoghue, *The Forest Reminds Us Who We Are*, North Atlantic Books, 2021.

Sophie Strand, www.sophiestrand.com. Her book, *The Flowering Wand: Rewilding the Sacred Masculine*, is forthcoming in November 2022 from Inner Traditions. I want to credit Sophie Strand for my use of the phrase “our senses are our superpowers.”