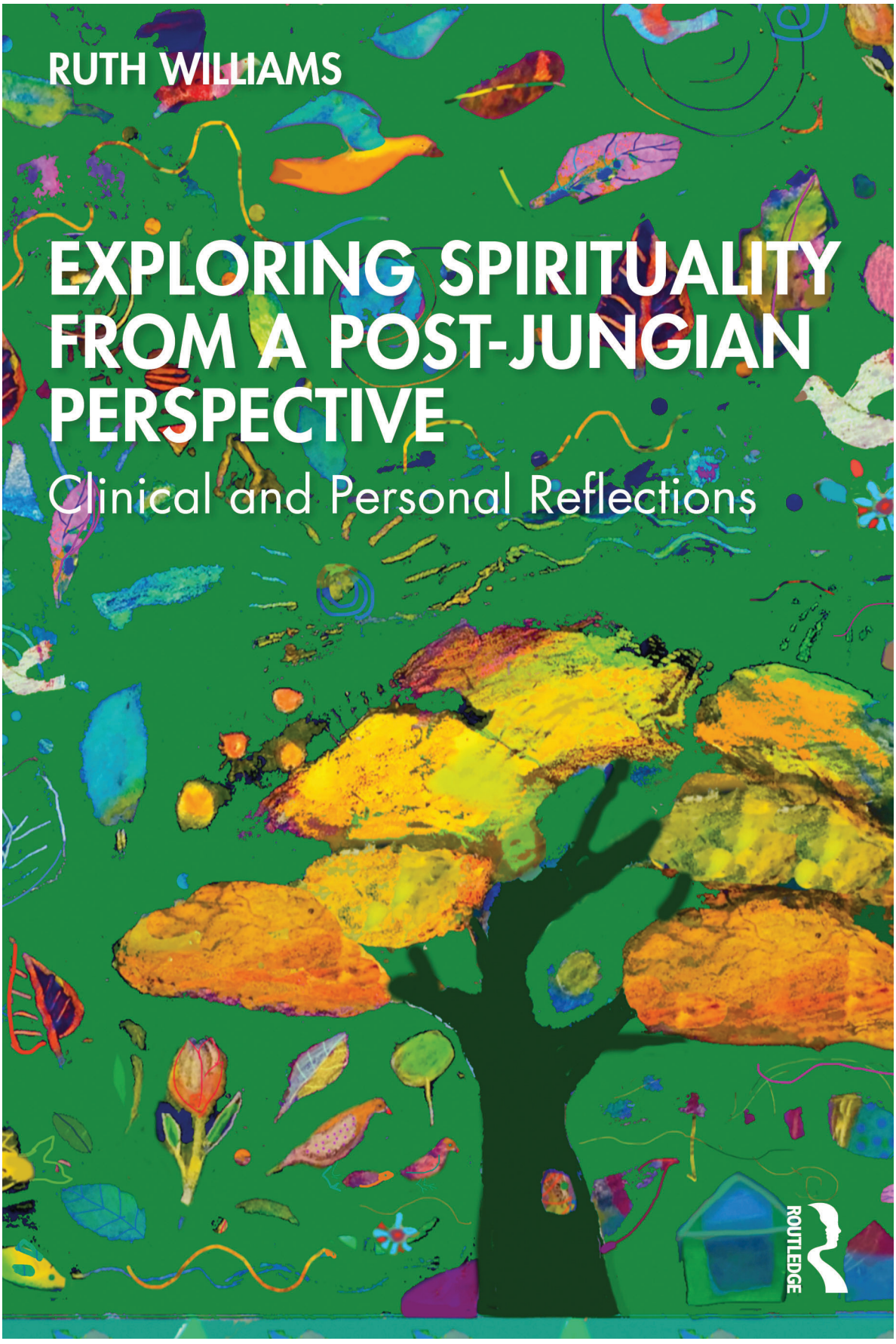
RUTH WILLIAMS
EXPLORING SPIRITUALITY FROM A POST-JUNGIAN PERSPECTIVE
Clinical and Personal Reflections
ROUTLEDGE

Designed cover image: **The Black Pine** by Arts4Giving artist © Sandy Damon 2021

First published 2023
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-25673-3 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-25681-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-003-28455-0 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003284550

Typeset in Times New Roman
by MPS Limited, Dehradun

Chapter 3

Gaia/ecology, indigenous perspectives and animals

Gaia/ecology

The sort of perspective the planets provide in the images just mentioned in chapter two puts us all in right proportion to our environment, to each other, to all of humanity and to our place on earth, ("this orbiting psychiatric ward" as Woody Allen so deftly calls it (2020 pp. 332)).

This might give us a sense of our responsibilities to do as little damage to the planet and the environment as we possibly can while we are here. We are merely the custodians of the planet for our brief stay. We might see ourselves as honoured visitors. A whole field of ecopsychology has been established over recent decades which can be explored in for instance (Roszak *et al* (1995) and Mathers (Ed.) (2021)).

The artist Ai Weiwei reminds us what makes this collective problem so difficult:

> It is human nature to believe that we are so smart, that we control the universe. But, at the same time, human nature is suicidal, because we never fully appreciate how temporary and ephemeral our fate really is. (2018 pp. 10)

Gaia is a word adopted by biochemist James Lovelock (1979) (from the ancient Greek term for earth mother) when he was exploring the idea the earth is regulated homeostatically. He saw the whole of nature is itself a self-regulating system, finely balanced to promote our wellbeing and conditions to survive.

Ecology is the study of connectedness. Attuning to the living, 'breathing' planet upon which we depend may help us understand the Indigenous concept of reciprocity with the earth; the need to honour that which we take from the earth, give thanks for the gifts we consume each day and be conscious of how we can give back.

If anyone has doubt about the wisdom of nature and how connected we truly are, I would refer you to the work of Peter Wohlleben, a forester who has written about how trees (which filter our air) communicate with each

DOI: 10.4324/9781003284550-5

other through a sophisticated root system – the wood wide web (2017)! This term was coined by Sir David Read who in 1984 was the first (with colleagues) to show carbon could pass between plants through fungal networks (M. Sheldrake 2020 pp. 168). He wrote a commentary on a paper in the journal *Nature* on the ground-breaking work of Dr Suzanne Simard who wrote an afterword to Wohlleben's book where she touches on her research which reveals:

> The wood wide web has been mapped, traced, monitored, and coaxed to reveal the beautiful structures and finely adapted languages of the forest network. We have learned that mother trees recognise and talk with their kin, shaping future generations. In addition, injured trees pass their legacies on to their neighbors, affecting gene regulation, defense chemistry, and resilience.
>
> (ibid. pp. 249)

Similar findings are coming forth about fungi too. (See the work of Merlin Sheldrake 2020, son of Rupert Sheldrake whom I mention elsewhere in this chapter). Wohlleben tells us that fungi have an: "underground cottony web, known as mycelium … There is a honey fungus … in Oregon … estimated to be 2,400 years old, extends for 2,000 acres, and weighs 660 tons. That makes the fungi the largest known living organisms in the world" (2017 pp. 50). The trees and fungi collaborate for their mutual survival. Wohlleben tells us:

> With the help of mycelium of an appropriate species for each tree … a tree can greatly increase its functional root surface so that it can suck up considerably more water and nutrients. You find twice the amount of life-giving nitrogen and phosphorus in plants that cooperate with fungal partners than in plants that tap the soil with their roots alone (ibid).

Have humans got a lot to learn about collaborating! Trees can not only share nutrients, they share information about impending insect attacks. Wohlleben reports trees have a form of brain in their root tips which 'feel'. Electrical impulses have been measured. Researchers from the University of Bonn discovered:

> In addition to the signalling pathways, there are also numerous systems and molecules similar to those found in animals. When a root feels its way forward in the ground, it is aware of stimuli. … If the root encounters toxic substances, impenetrable stones, or saturated soil, it analyses the situation and transmits the necessary adjustments to the growing tip. The root tip changes direction as a result of this communication and steers the growing root around the critical areas.
>
> (Wohlleben 2017 pp. 83)

This interconnection between the trees has a downside. Wohlleben recounts a lightning strike he witnessed of a particular Douglas fir resulting in the death of the surrounding firs within a radius of 50 ft, from which he inferred that: "instead of the life-giving sugar" they would normally share via the roots, "what they received was a deadly serving of electricity" (ibid. pp. 206).

Jung wrote a great deal about how we are interconnected. Nathan Field (Jungian analyst in the UK) writes about this when discussing thought transference between analyst and patient, and the unexpected unconscious happenings and synchronicities which can arise. Field tells us:

> [Jung] compared individual consciousness to islands standing up in the sea; if we look below the surface we realise that at the level of the sea bed we are joined. Somehow we have to entertain the paradoxical notion that, as living beings, we are both separate and united.
>
> (1996 pp. 42)

Jungian analyst Dale Mathers in London envisages our minds as being metaphorically like: "complex eco systems – neural forests, each with over ten billion interconnected trees" (2021 pp. 162) which he sees as the network of connections enabling us humans to communicate via the collective unconscious. Patterns in nature can be seen everywhere.

M. Sheldrake describes the electrical system in fungi through their mycelial networks as being akin to the electrical impulses in animal nerve cells (2020 pp. 7). (Sheldrake comes out with some absolute corkers (awesome facts), such as we have more bacteria in our guts than there are stars in the galaxy (ibid. pp. 18)).

Fungi also have the potential to repair some of the harm we humans have perpetrated on earth as they have the ability to transform pollutants in soil and waterways; they can degrade pesticides, crude oil, some plastics and the detritus from various chemicals we scatter in our waste (ibid. pp. 205–6). Pretty smart! The caveat is this is absolutely at the cutting edge and still awaiting institutional adoption and academic scrutiny which means, partly, overcoming vested interests who profit from *not* pursuing such a radical agenda.

My interest in these networks is not purely love and awe of the beauty of nature. It is the awareness of our non-separation from all other forms of life which is encapsulated well by Professor Michael C. Kalton of University of Washington (whose speciality is Korean Neo-Confucianism):

> Concern for the well-being and relative continuity of the life community with which we co-evolved requires no altruism; we understand now that we ultimately interdepend in the web of biotic life so that concern for other creatures operates in synergy with self-concern. This is the spiritual dynamic of systemically grounded horizontal transcendence, where the part and the whole are never two.
>
> (2000 pp. 196–7)

By horizontal transcendence he means we belong to the universe as opposed to needing to transcend vertically to an Absolute.

Coming back to trees, they communicate with us too. Wohlleben tells us standing underneath conifers raises the blood pressure, whereas standing under an oak lowers it (2017 pp. 223). Most extraordinary of all, Wohlleben mentions a study in California which has discovered fruit flies might dream (ibid. 242)! (This research is contained in a German paper entitled (in translation) "A fly's eye view of the world") in the Süddeutsche Zeitung of 19 May 2010, available at www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/forschung-die-welt-aus-sicht-einerfliege-1.908384 accessed January 21, 2016.)

I want to mention another book about trees which is *The Oak Papers* by James Canton (2020). He focuses predominantly on one single oak tree which he spent a year 'visiting' and where he recorded the changes around him and within himself. He found it was nourishing to his soul to be close to trees (which I am sure many of us can attest to for ourselves). He touches on the depth of feeling which arises when you touch a tree; the connection to the more than human world this elicits. He saw his daily ritual of visiting the oaks like a meditative or religious practice. I learnt from Canton there is a team at the University of Murcia in Spain studying the ecological and philosophical basis of plant intelligence.

Even the Dalai Lama has made public he is in favour of large-scale tree planting to help tackle climate change and says he would vote Green, declaring, if Buddha returned to this world, "Buddha would be green"! (See: 'Buddha would be green': Dalai Lama calls for urgent climate action | Dalai Lama | The Guardian accessed 15th April 2022.)

I used at one time to photograph trees which seemed to have faces in the pattern of their bark. I guess it was my way of having a proto interaction with the trees as I intuitively sensed they were animated (ensouled). And who does not love to hug a tree if no one is watching?! Every child knows there is something precious and fascinating about trees, loving the physical contact of climbing them. It is a pity, as we become adults, many lose that uninhibited connection. Many of us have connections to particular trees and even have tattoos of them. Traditional harvesters (from Indigenous communities) see trees as non-human 'persons' to be approached with humility. Permission is asked in those communities before chopping a tree. This becomes a mindful practice.

Indigenous perspectives

Davi Kopenawa, a shaman from the Yanomami community in the Brazilian Amazon, tells us of their ancient indigenous belief system which appears prescient:

> The white people probably think that *Teosi* [God] will manage to make the *xawara* smoke from their factories disappear from the sky?

> They are wrong. Carried very high into its chest by the wind, it is already starting to soil and burn it. It is true, the sky … is getting as sick as we do! If all this continues, its image will become riddled with holes from the heat of the mineral fumes. Then it will slowly melt, like a plastic bag thrown in the fire, and the thunders will no longer stop shouting in anger. This has not happened yet because the sky's *hutukarari* spirits are constantly pouring water on it to cool it down. But we shamans fear this disease of the sky more than anything. The *xapiri* [spirits] and all the other inhabitants of the forest are also very worried about it because if the sky catches fire, it will fall again. Then we will all be burned, and we will be hurled into the underworld like the first people in the beginning of time.
>
> (2013 pp. 295–6)

I do not know what the Yanomami know of the latest research into the ozone layer or global warming, but it appears in their native cosmogony. Their wisdom is gleaned via spiritual journeying and dreaming. Kopenawa relates his story as he is concerned we will all perish if action is not taken to reverse the damage mankind is doing to the planet. Kopenawa had to travel far and wide beyond his community in an effort to resist the incursions made by gold prospectors, loggers and cattle ranchers cutting down swathes of the ancient, untouched Amazon forests.

As an aside, in stark contrast to our Western materialist frenzy which has caused the havoc and destruction to the earth, the Yanomami destroy all the personal belongings of a person when they die which means there is none of the egregious clamouring to inherit when a person dies. The Yanomami see possessions belonging to a deceased as carrying the imprint of the person which will cause sadness to their loved ones. Destroying these objects is part of the mourning process for them. Kopenawa:

> We think it is bad to own a dead man's goods. It fills our thoughts with sorrow. Our real goods are the things of the forest: its waters, fish, game, trees, and fruit. Not merchandise! This is why as soon as someone dies we make all the objects he kept disappear. We grind up his bead necklaces; we burn his hammock, his arrows, his quiver, his gourds, and his feather ornaments.
>
> (2013 pp. 330)

Traditional Roma families do the same. They burn the body in the deceased's Vardo (vehicle like a caravan), along with all their possessions, considering it bad luck if you do not do this (Dr Dale Mathers, personal communication 22 April 2022).

Later, Kopenawa tells us:

> I do not have a taste for possessing much merchandise … In the beginning it is attractive, yes, but it quickly gets damaged and then we start to miss it. … For me, only the forest is a precious good. Knives get blunt, machetes get chipped, pots get black, hammocks get holes, and the paper skins of money come apart in the rain. Meanwhile, tree leaves can stiffen and fall, but they will always grow back, as beautiful and bright as before. The small amount of merchandise I possess is sufficient and I do not desire more.
>
> (ibid. pp. 337)

Kopenawa struggles to relate to the Western way of thinking we need bigger, faster, more and nothing is ever enough. As do many Westerners! (See Paul Watchel's *The Poverty of Affluence,* 1989). Capitalism wants unhappy people as they spend more money! There seems to be no limit to people's desires and addictions; rivalries to obtain the latest/best/shiniest/most aspirational goods and lifestyles), even parading their imagined perfect family (as defined by the advertising industry and social media). These attempts cannot fill the existential void, though, which people must face at some point in life. And, as difficult as that is, it is also a good thing. We need to learn consumption cannot satisfy spiritual hunger. The secret of life does not lie in consumerism.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2020), member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, (American Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology; Director, Center for Native Peoples and the Environment, at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry) penned a guideline to encapsulate the teachings she has learned from her Indigenous community as a rule of thumb for how to approach the gifts the earth offers which they refer to as the Honourable Harvest. It is deeply respectful and modest, encouraging us to be in a relationship with nature and treat it with honour. She talks of only taking what we need; what is given by the earth. There is no need to be greedy and acquisitive. There is plenty. The community encourage a modest stance, perhaps as you might treat an honoured guest in your home – except that, here, we are the guest!

Even Bill Gates, then the wealthiest man on earth, realised he had made enough and turned to philanthropy, an example some have been inspired to emulate.

Kopenawa forces us to think about many Western ways we take for granted. For instance, he was taken to a museum in Paris and shown the remains of early indigenous people preserved alongside their arrows and tools and beads which would normally have been destroyed (see above). Kopenawa was angry to see beings and their belongings so disrespected for

our entertainment. Later he talks of visiting New York (where Kopenawa had been invited to speak in defence of his people) and not being able to fathom the discrepancy between the rich at the centre of the metropolis and the poor at the outskirts. From his perspective it was truly an alien way to live. He notices how disturbed his sleep and dreams are in a city; how people rush around looking at the ground without making eye contact with each other. He cannot help but notice the pollution, the roaring of the noises at every turn, the adrenaline fuelled and empty way of life which has become normalised in the industrialised West.

In Yanomami mythology *Omama* (the Creator) is central to ecology. Humans are seen as part of ecology alongside the spirits, game, trees, rivers and everything natural. This is fundamental to their worldview. They are guided by the spirits of the forest in all they do. Their interest however is not simply in protecting their forests, but the whole of the planet (ibid. Chapter 23).

David Tacey encapsulates his own concerns:

> [i]t may be easier for us as a nation [Australia] to approach the task of resacralizing through environmental and social ecology … ecology almost looks like a pragmatic and secular activity, and devotion to the needs of the environment may not cause the same embarrassment that devotion to the spirit would generate. Through ecology we attend to the most urgent practical issues in the world, and yet, within the practice of ecology there is the romantic and mythopoetic impulse, eros itself, engaged in its vital task of binding, weaving and connecting us to the other. Through ecology we strive to heal the world and ourselves, to transcend the contemporary condition and link our souls vitally to the soul of the world.
>
> (2009 pp. 139–140)

Arthur Machen

It is not of course only indigenous people who possess this perspective on man's relationship to our natural environment. The Edwardian Welsh writer Arthur Machen (1863–1947), known for his supernatural fantasy and horror fiction, describes:

> the impact of a particular landscape on an individual, and suggests that the landscape and the individual have conjoined in a way that constellates particular qualities in the human because the same qualities, in a nonhuman form, are inherent in the landscape.
>
> (Letter from Liz Greene to the IAJS Discussion Seminar 9 August 2020)

Greene goes on to cite the following from the end of Machen's story (originally in an anthology called *The Children of the Pool and Other Stories* (Hutchinson, London, 1936):

> The things which we distinguish as qualities or values are inherent in the real environment to make the configuration that they do make with our sensory response to them. There is such a thing as a "sad" landscape even when we who look at it are feeling jovial … That is not imputing human attributes to what are described as "demand characters" in the environment, but *giving proper recognition to the other end of a nexus, of which only one end is organised in our own mind*. (emphasis in original).
> (Machen 1964 pp. 334)

These approaches are all bridging difference.

Ecocide

The problems I have been drawing attention to around the despoilation of the earth which is creating the climate crisis, is garnering increasing attention and there are moves afoot to establish an international crime known as ecocide. World leaders are being called upon to make ecocide the fifth crime against peace, alongside genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of aggression. This would make it easier to hold those responsible to account in a concrete way. Ecocide is a crime against the living, natural world. I refer you to the work of Scottish barrister and ardent campaigner Polly Higgins who pioneered this movement and who describes ecocide as "a missing atrocity crime of corporate and State responsibility, a missing international crime against peace" (See https://pollyhiggins.com/ accessed 23rd April 2022).

Conscious choice

Much of what I touch on here is about how we relate to each other and reaching more intimate, meaningful, spiritual depths.

If you follow a spiritual path, you need to be sure this is what you really want. It can be a solitary path as for each of us it will be unique and one we need to tread as individuals. A spiritual or religious community can be a comforting confraternity, but we arrive alone and must needs leave this life alone. You may break collusions you have with friends or relatives which you might find do not hold as you strive to be true to your authentic self. This is not easy. Many end up compromising their individual path to retain the company of their friends and family. No blame there. We are social creatures. For introverts it is perhaps easier to dedicate life to a solitary path which some may experience as sacrifice as the inner world is the primary focus in life. (See my *Jung: The Basics* for an exposition of Jung's psychological types of which

introversion and extraversion are an aspect (Williams 2019 pp. 85–104.) Couples who continue to grow both individually and together while both pursuing a spiritual path are fortunate indeed. And quite rare I would venture.

Man's connection with animals (and New Physics)

Finally, I want to touch on man's connection with animals which I wrote about elsewhere (2021). In that chapter I touch on how we are connected with animals and the universe through multiple systems (such as psychology, symbols and spirituality making links with the New Physics). Many of us have experienced uncanny connections with our pets and I suggest these are not random. We are connected by energy fields known variously as Morphic Resonance (R.Sheldrake 2009 and 2011); the Akashic Field (Laszlo 2004); the Implicate Order (Bohm 1980/2002); or holograms (Talbot 1991). These approaches all help us understand our connections with animals as well as each other. They show us how we are linked on subtle levels so that it is no wonder we affect each other and cherish time we can spend with animals. For children it may be a first experience of loving and learning about responsibility to another creature.

Many of us may have experienced inexplicable phenomena with animals. How do they know when their owners are about to arrive home? Because they do. How do they know when their owners are ill? It is well-known dogs can detect when their owners are sick and have even saved lives by alerting the owner to seek medical attention. For example, the animal is drawn to a changed smell in an area where cancer has not yet been medically detected. Or when they intuit an owner is about to have an epileptic fit. It is worth quoting biologist Rupert Sheldrake who cites an impressive anecdote from his research:

> [the dog] can sense, up to 50 minutes before, that I am going to have an attack and taps me twice with his paw, giving me time to get somewhere safe. He can also press a button on my phone and bark when it is answered, to get help, and, if he thinks I'm going to have an attack while I am in the bath, he'll pull the plug out.
>
> (2011, p. 196)

Anna Breytenbach in South Africa is an extraordinary sensitive who has become an animal communicator creating a communicative bridge between human and non-human animals. She tells us:

> By connecting with our intuition, we can engage in meaningful dialogue and remember how to hear the subtle messages from those whose space we share in our lives and our natural environment. Coming from a

> place of respect and reverence for all life, we can learn to understand our wilder relatives, honour their truths and live in greater harmony.
>
> (See https://www.animalspirit.org/ accessed 14th September 2020)

There are many stories of Breytenbach communicating with animals. The most striking one is of her being called in to an animal sanctuary where a black leopard has been behaving in an aggressive and upset manner. She sits with him and discovers that he is unhappy with being called Diablo with all the negative connotations that entails. She understands from him that is not his true nature and tells the keepers what she has learnt. After she leaves, the keeper goes to 'talk' with Diablo and apologises, saying he realises this name is not true to his spirit, they will leave him in peace and will now call him Spirit. The leopard came out of his hiding place for the first time in months and was now at peace and ceased his aggressive behaviour. I realise this story may sound far-fetched. I would encourage you to search on YouTube where you can actually see this filmed encounter taking place.

In this era where humans have had such a destructive impact on our precious planet, I think this becomes increasingly important. The animals are letting us know, I believe, that they are in distress. There was a case reported in the press at the time of writing which tells us of a group of orcas – killer whales – making an apparently unprovoked attack on a sail boat in the Straits of Gibraltar. This just does not normally happen. The pod kept ramming the boat for more than an hour. See: https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/sep/13/the-tale-of-the-killer-whales (accessed 15th September 2020). There have since been other similar reports. We can only speculate on the cause of such attacks, but humans are responsible for depleting the food stock required for their survival which is also causing them to lose babies. We probably all know now of the gargantuan volumes of pollution mankind has mindlessly emptied into the oceans such as both plastics and oil spills. Perhaps nature is fighting back.

Animals are now even at the forefront of scientific research at this time of global pandemic. Scientists in Helsinki have been trialling a pilot project where they train sniffer dogs to identify cases of Covid-19 and the success rate has been close to 100%. (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/24/close-to-100-accuracy-airport-enlists-sniffer-dogs-to-test-for-covid-19?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other accessed 24th September 2020).

If you think of all beings as manifestations of the same basic energy (both human and more-than-human), I wonder how it might change our perspective and our reverence and respect for each other? I wonder how we might feel about eating animal flesh if we really experienced that perspective? The need to radically reduce meat consumption in order to counteract some of the effects of climate change is now well-known, so that such a shift would have beneficial effects on both personal and collective levels; for our 'individual' souls and the *anima mundi*.

Sensitivity

Many of us will probably have experienced the odd sensation of walking down a road to 'feel' someone's gaze behind you. Or having picked up the phone only to find the person you were ringing already on the line to you. These things happen all the time (see R. Sheldrake 2004). We are connected via the same invisible threads touched on above in relation to animals, and it is when we lose sense of these deep links that we are more likely to treat each other like strangers and even enemies.

I am referring now to matters that might more precisely be termed uncanny rather than spiritual. However, my point is that there is more on heaven on earth than meets the eye and these experiences connect us to a realm which is more than the concrete, humdrum or temporal dimension. We can develop this connection – this sensitivity. You might find this enrichens your connections with others and the world around you. It takes conscious effort to do this and might be facilitated by some of the methods I mentioned in chapter two. A deeper and more attuned connection to your own interiority and the gifts you may find there, tends to engender greater harmony and connection not only internally, but with the world around us and those who cross our paths. (The flip side of this would be greater [over]sensitivity in a neurotic/Borderline way – tends to create disharmony and disunity with the world around us and those we encounter.)

If the notions covered in this chapter strike you as implausible, I would encourage you to refer to your heart. It has its own wordless wisdom. Rationality is a good servant, but a bad master. We are so much more than our rational minds and I suspect that, if you are reading this, you will have at least an inkling of this for yourself. Perhaps I can invite you to read on with an open mind and heart. As Susie Orbach has it, in referring to what she calls the epic work on consciousness of Mark Solms:

> [he] resituates psychoanalysis on the ground of affects … . We could summarize this as: We are because we feel. We feel therefore we are. We know because we feel.
>
> (Hilty (Ed.) 2022 pp. xiii)

So, you might find it helpful to engage your feeling and intuitive capacities as well as your intellectual powers when trying to grasp these ideas. You might find you are more sensitive to the subtle energies we have looked at than you ordinarily admit in daily life, and this may be something that might be welcomed.

I will end this chapter with an important question which might arise in the quest you may follow in these chapters and which might require some quiet reflection:

> Is it possible to embrace spiritual meaning and not become either childish or irrational, while increasing one's genuine awe, inspiration, gratitude, *and* intellectual appreciation of living now in this period of scientific skepticism?
>
> (Young-Eisendrath and Miller 2000 pp. 2)

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Resources

Ecopscyhology UK website: https://ecopsychologyuk.ning.com/
Viridis Graduate Institute, Ecopsychology and Environmental Humanities website: https://www.viridis.edu/