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Persons as Plants: Ecopsychology and the return to the Dream of Nature

Abstract. In this article, I examine human-plant perceptions and interactions in terms of developing a new perspective on the perception and the actions of people towards plants. By combining my scientific understanding of the biological world and my own experiences working with plant shamans, storytellers and mystics from around the world, I engage with the idea that the hierarchical structure by which Western science defines the variety of life forms as 'primitive' or 'more evolved' is at the root of the current environmental crisis and I argue that the solution to it rests in a change of this very perspective.

Introduction: the hero's mythical journey

In the human spirit, as in the universe, nothing is higher or lower; everything has equal rights to a common center, which manifests its hidden existence precisely through his harmonic relationship between every part and itself. Goethe

With the provocative title *Plants as Persons*, Matthew Hall's recent brainchild stirred up an exciting discourse on the perception and the action of people towards plants, and more generally, Nature. In sharing my excitement over this book with a friend, I was asked whether the word *persons* is 'proper English' and whether it is even reasonable to equate plants to people¹. So let this essay be the journey that starts there, at the origin and significance of this word; a journey that weaves its way through the powerful threads of Silverstein's storytelling² to nurse the Western rational mind from the bigoted Aristotelian idea of the inferior nature of plants to the timeless and soul-full reality of plants as teachers experienced by indigenous healers and shamans across the globe.

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And from the world of shamans, so beautifully embroidered with magic and deep truths, let this journey bring us back to the scientific world of the Western mind, but with a new much-needed perception of what humans call 'Nature'. And just like in TS Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*, let this be a journey that ultimately returns us to the place from where we started, but which we now truly know for the first time³.

Linguistic heritage and the human condition: what is a *person*?

Generally, the term 'person' is used to indicate a human being. However in its origin the word, derived from the Latin word *persona*, which in turn was most probably derived from the Etruscan word *persu*, referred to the masked actors that appeared in theatrical performances where the mask described the character an actor played on stage. I find the epistemology of this word to be particularly intriguing, because its original meaning is still interwoven with our current thinking, so much so that it has been retained virtually intact within the Jungian framework of modern psychoanalysis. Indeed Jung referred to the *persona* as the outer face of the psyche, the mask through which human beings act out their roles as they relate to each other and the world around them.

While the mask lubricates and eases our social exchanges in everyday living, this role-playing game comes with the ever-present danger of identifying one's true Self with the mask (or several masks). When we fall for it, we shrivel behind the mask or ego-image of our mental and emotional states where we can only see and experience the distorted shadows of things⁴, slipping down towards a sort of *psychological mummification* (O'Connor 66). Because life lived behind all these masks becomes a very lonely and unfulfilling affair, we inevitably strive for the opposite state of being that leads to true psychological development, guiding us back towards the experience of the Self and the acceptance of everything 'as is' (rather than what we think it should be). Now, if the drama of life (as we perceive it) is the special ingredient that makes a *person*, then plants are no persons. Plants live no dramas and require no psychoanalysis to unlock otherwise closed doors in their emotional lives, as we do. And this is so because plants are at peace with being exactly what they are, plants⁵. By being truly immersed in the matrix of Nature, plants 'know' what their place in Nature is, but do we?⁶ So, allow me to share a story.

Storytelling: from a giving tree to the pyramid of life (upside down)

This story goes something like this...Once there was a huge apple tree and a little boy. Every day, the boy would come to the tree to play. The boy would climb up the trunk, swing from the branches, play with the leaves, eat the apples and take a nap under the shadow of the tree. And the boy was happy. And the tree was happy. As time went by, the boy grew older and no longer interested in playing around the tree. Instead he wanted money to buy things and asked the tree for help. Because she loved the boy very much, the tree was delighted to offer him all her apples, so he may sell them to make money and be happy. And the boy climbed the tree, took all the apples and did not come back for some time. Then one day, the boy returned and this time he wanted a house and again asked the tree for help. Because she loved the boy very much, the tree gladly offered all of her branches to the boy, so he may use them to build a house and be happy. And the boy cut all the branches off, took them away to build a house and did not come back for a long time. Then once again, the boy returned feeling sad and unhappy. He wanted a boat to take him away and so he asked the tree for help. And again, because she loved the boy very much, the tree happily let him cut her down so he may build a boat in which to sail away and be happy. And the boy cut her down to a stump, built a boat and sailed away. It took many years for the boy to return to the tree. Now an old and tired man, he only wanted a quiet place to sit and rest. "Well, an old tree stump is a good place for sitting and resting. Come boy, sit down and rest," said the tree. So the boy sat down and rested, and the tree was very happy.

This is the story of *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, who certainly wrote it for children but even more so for adults. In fact, whether at first glance it looks just like another bedtime story, both children and adults find this tale especially moving and inspirational because it speaks to us of unconditional love⁷. That is the kind of love that places no limits and does not set any conditions on what it should be. That is the kind of love that Nature, which is overwhelmingly made up of plants, offers freely and human beings symbiotically depend on to survive⁸ and so deeply ache for to be happy (Albrecht et al. 2007, S95-S98). On the stage of life where we all play, I believe no human being can truly deny plants their role as nurturers of the human

physical and emotional subsistence. Yet according to the Western hierarchical understanding of the natural world, those motionless and insentient beings are clearly of inferior nature compared to animals and (of course) humans, and are therefore relegated to the bottom of the pyramid of life. So what is going on here?

Let me share another story. In early 2010, I went to a little village near the seaside in the Philippines and there, I met William. He was a very playful and energetic man, and a well-regarded psychic surgeon⁹. Because of our respective natures, I almost incessantly asked questions on his work and he gave almost continuous and clear explanations on it. During one of our numerous exchanges, he described to me the nature of plant, animal and human beings as they are seen from the *astral* plane or the plane of existence that modern physics call the 9th dimension (Tiller, 56). In this emotional hyperspace, plants are indeed the simplest beings as they exclusively embody the most refined energy of love. Animals are more complex because they express love as well as fear; and finally humans, certainly the most multifaceted, embody the energy of love, fear and doubt. According to William, doubt is the root of all our *dis-ease* states, which include both ailments manifested in the physical dimension and the discomfort expressed emotionally, and it is the cause of our emotional inadequacy that prevents us to truly love. It was immediately clear that my academic understanding of life hierarchies needed significant adjustment: who was I to rule out the possibility that the Western mind got the pyramid of life upside down?¹⁰

Role-reversal: Plants as teachers and the solution to the environmental crisis

For millennia, plants have been regarded as animated superior intelligent beings and honoured as teachers by many cultures. In the Americas, for instance, dozens of indigenous groups still revere plants for the psychological and spiritual impacts they have on both individuals and communities. In late 2010, I was fortunate to find myself in the Amazonian jungle under the nurturing guidance of a Peruvian shaman and have a brief but direct experience of this plant teacher-human student relationship that, until then, I had considered just an interesting concept. The teacher-student dialogue is developed through a specific *dieta* (Luna 1984, 123-133). This is a period of

apprenticeship spent in isolation in the jungle, during which the student observes total sexual abstinence and a very strict diet, while ingesting parts of the teacher plant at varying interval depending on the species. It is during such *dieta* that the initiate learns how to connect with the spirit of that particular plant, which will instruct him/her through visions and songs¹¹. Indeed, the communication between humans and plants is established through a non-dualistic language (Greenway, 122) of sound; and, shamans must learn the song that each species of plant possesses for the teaching to take place. In Peruvian shamanism, in particular, the plant teachers reveal themselves during the *dieta* and gift the shaman with their songs, called *icaros*. And today still, shamans are above all people who sing and, through chanting, endeavour to establish and retain a strong ecological and spiritual connection with individual plant species, so that they may be taught, for example, how to diagnose and treat specific illnesses (Luna 1984, 135-156). My personal journey into the world of Peruvian plants and their shamans turned out to be an extremely fruitful and rich experience; yet upon my return home to Australia, it was even more interesting to learn that there is no need to go to these far away lands of shamans to experience plants as teachers.

Recently, plant spirit medicine man Phil Roberts pointed out to me that plants are in fact mentoring us on how to find solutions to our human problems in spite of and within our concreted western world of cities and technology. Phil sits next to a plant on the verge of an ordinary suburban street, quiets his mind and then waits patiently to be invited in for an 'internal' conversation with the spirit of the plant. And it is within this meditative space that the plant delivers its *medicine* to him and for him to use with the people that come to his clinic. Indeed being 'whole' rather than divided by fear and love, plants are to modern humanity a unique and whole-some source of medicine in all facets. This is why our learning from plants does not have to be limited to an understanding of their chemical properties that heal the physical body. Of course, we already know that plants offer humans more than physical healing; we already know that they are a constant source of inspiration, and through this we have already learnt, for example, how to bind fabrics together (like the tiny hooks found on the surface of burdock seeds, which have inspired the creation of hook-and-loop fasteners, commonly known as Velcro) or harness

energy more efficiently (like the recently designed biomimetic heliotropic solar panels that mimic the way plants gradually tilt towards the sun to optimize solar energy capture). Yet, plant teaching extend far beyond the pragmatism of the material world; it heals the mind by piercing through the rich drapery of appearances (made of energy and consciousness) that we recognize as physical realities, but which both modern science and ancient wisdom agree on describing as a *Dream*. Within this dream, plants have one simple teaching for us, whether it is delivered through our devotion to gardening on the weekend or our venturing into the jungle to apprentice to indigenous shamans; they teach us to move past the illusion of duality that restrict modern life to the rhythm of Time, and enter a level of *entangled* reality where there is no time and no separation into self and other, hence no conflict, no destruction, no ecological crisis¹². Why then, just like the boy in *The Giving Tree*, we seem to be so obstinate about dysfunctionally living in apartheid with plant life and hence perpetuating a state of crisis?

In the view of indigenous people around the world, the relationship between humans and Nature, and specifically plants is an unequivocal one of respect. In the words of Australian Aboriginal elder and custodian of Uluru as well as beautiful friend, Uncle Bob Randall:

“We live in Kanyini! The word Kanyini means being responsible with unconditional love for all living things and each one of us need to live a life of caring. It means appreciate all things that care for us in their many ways; from the air we breathe, the water we drink to the plant people that gives us life and the many animals whose lives are taken so that we can live. They are all full of love, full of Kanyini and we too need to reach that level of living our life moment by moment, learning to really care for each other so that there are no strangers in our neighbourhood, there are no strangers in the town we live in, no strangers in the cities, no strangers in the world. We are all one family.”

Because of this *unitive* ability to feel at one with life and see the dignity of all manifestations of life, this view of the world cherishes and accepts all beings “as is” in a non-controlling and non-hierarchical way. Away from such eco-psychological wisdom also known as the Dream of Nature, most of us

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experience the dualistic world of industrialized Western societies and its conventional mind, which by definition is characterized by the concepts of isolation (the self) and conflict (the others). Such mind is indeed incarnated in the grand myth of modern Western science, based on the unquestioned assumption that subject and object are separate and the blind belief that we can control Nature through proper scientific methods and analyses. Clearly through the lenses of this conventional mind of maximal separation between subject and object, we believe reality to be something external to ourselves and made up of solid, permanent objects awaiting to be scientifically measured, analysed and controlled for our gain. While this may indeed be how a fully-grown and functional adult is defined and accepted within the current model of modern society, I am intrigued by the fact that such scientific mindframe neatly corresponds to the Piagetian *formal operational stage* representative of the cognitive development of 11-16 year old children and also known as the adolescence period when humans start developing the ability to think about abstract concepts and start exhibiting a capacity for logical thought and deductive reasoning. As such, we may simply recognize that the modern Western mind is at an immature developmental stage, still naïve of the fundamental inter-connectedness of all phenomena and just like a young and irresponsible adolescent, it is focused on externalizing and projecting the internal delusion of separation and the associated turmoil outwardly. Then the current crisis, whether perpetuating environmental abuse or other, is the outer manifestation of this inner distraught state and it can only be resolved by learning who we are and how we fit into the rest of Nature, thereby moving beyond adolescence into the powerful and responsible time of adulthood. Personally, I believe we are experiencing this growth right now; in fact, we now recognize our destructive capacity and have already acted by creating, for example, natural parks to protect natural habitats and their species from our own devastating activities. These protected areas are places where we can be in harmony with Nature; although it is true that they still occupy only a relatively small portion of the continents, it is also fair to acknowledge that we have only 'woke-up' to this necessity in the course of the last century. We are now actively restoring forests and recycling paper; countries such as Costa Rica have shown great example of 'adulthood' by investing funding and resources, previously

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devoted to their military industry, towards the conservation of their land, protection of their forests and education of their people. Successful programs for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity already exist in many countries, which have now also developed comprehensive legal frameworks to implement such programs effectively. Moreover, Earth jurisprudence, a network that contributes to granting rights and legal standing to Nature and hence actively offering viable solutions in support of the health of ecological systems, is now a reality around the world. Despite the continuing destructive activities such as mining, fracking, polluting and deforesting, I believe that the rise of programs and initiatives like those described above is a clear indicator of the change that is currently happening as part of our evolution as a species. So, are we finally moving beyond adolescence and becoming responsible adults? Ironically, just like in the story of *The Giving Tree*, it seems we need to go around in circles a few times before discovering that the salve of peace, solace and contentment is simply attained by listening to the invitation of the tree and once again, sitting in the Dream of Nature yet with a mature post-conventional and unitive mind. After all, isn't it true that the hero's journey found in so many narratives around the world is completed when the hero hears their own story and the emerging wisdom returns the hero home?

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Notes

¹ In his book, Hall clearly specifies that the view of plants as persons is not concerned with projecting human-like faculties where they do not exist, but rather with relating to these other-than-humans as living beings who have their own perspectives and ability to communicate in their own way.

² American poet, composer, cartoonist and author of children's books.

³ One of four Quartets written in 1942 by T.S. Eliot on the main theme of time and eternity, *Little Gidding* exemplifies the cyclic progression of human understanding. Each of the four Quartets derives its name from a place which was particularly important to the American poet. *Little Gidding* is a village in the historic county of Huntingdonshire (now Cambridgeshire), which Eliot visited in 1936.

⁴ In the Myth of the Cave, Plato viewed the human condition through the analogy of chained prisoners, who can only see the distorted shadows of reality on the wall of a cave.

⁵ If we were to categorize plants according to human standards, they would be described as unitive beings living in the universal paradigm of the undifferentiated field of consciousness. For a user-friendly description of the Wilber's *unitive* state as well as the other developmental stages of consciousness, see Cook-Greuter, Susanne. *A detailed description of nine stages in ego development theory including the construct-aware and the unitive stages*. 2005. Web. 2 Sept. 2012. <http://www.stillpointintegral.com/docs/cook-greuter.pdf>

⁶ Re-situating the human being in the living world by understanding our place and task on this planet is the focal domain of Philosophical Ecology. For example, see Kohak, Erazim. *The embers and the stars: a philosophical inquiry into the moral*

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sense of Nature. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1984. Print.

⁷ The word 'love' is not used here to denote a human value or construct that we may project on to how plants feel or relate to us. Instead, it refers to the idea that plants together with non-human animals are indeed endowed with their *own* personal way of expressing feelings. Darwin himself discussed the topic of animal emotions in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) and also claimed that "the lower animals, like man, manifestly feel pleasure and pain, happiness, and misery" (in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*; pp. 448). Moreover, recent scientific research has provided evidence that animals feel a full range of emotions, including fear and love (for example, see Bekoff, Marc. *Animal emotions: exploring passionate natures*. 2000. Bioscience 5:861-870). This is somehow unsurprising given that we share common neurochemicals, such as serotonin and testosterone, and even brain structures, such as the hypothalamus that are important in the expression and feeling of emotions like anger, for example. Thus, the word 'love' clearly does not describe an exclusively human domain; the real question should not be about whether animals experience emotions or feelings but rather *how* they experience them in the privacy of their mental states. In regards to plants, the state-of-affair is truly not much different; plants exhibit cooperative and altruistic behaviours similar to those seen in animal social systems. It is a given that they have their *own* way of expressing their concern for the welfare of others, but so do humans. Based on the rapidly mounting scientific evidence of the amazing animal-like feats plants are capable of, I suggest it would be wise to assume that they do 'love' until proven otherwise.

⁸ In principle, our symbiotic relationship with plants is of a commensal nature, where plants provide us with oxygen, food, shelter, clothing and fuel amongst other goods, while they are neither helped nor hurt. However, it stands to reason that an excessive number of commensals (e.g. uncontrolled increase in the human population) on a single host (e.g. our forests as a whole) will indeed hurt the host and the relationship will slide towards the parasitic.

⁹ Psychic surgery is widely practiced in the Philippine Islands, but it is also performed in Indonesia, Central Africa and Brazil. During psychic surgery, the

body is opened with the bare hands of the healer. Tumours, body tissue, a blood clot, or any unwanted obstruction are removed painlessly from inside the body, without the use of anaesthesia and while the patient is conscious.

¹⁰ This has parallels with writing in East Asian Buddhism, which sees plants as enlightened beings, or 'perfect yogis'.

¹¹ In the Western world, this kind of shamanic work is often equated to the use of the psychoactive herbal brew, known as ayahuasca. And indeed, the "ayahuasca movement" in the West has gained incredible popularity over the last few decades. Yet, all *vegetalistas* (i.e. plant shamans) are adamant about the crucial importance of the dieta and insist on the fact that the real work of becoming familiar and sensitive to the spirit of the plants and their teachings takes place during the isolating period of the dieta. Because of this, attending to ayahuasca ceremonies alone will not take the student very far.

¹² Plant research has recently shown that fundamental processes like photosynthesis (and possibly sound production), may be of a quantistic nature, where atoms and molecules are 'in sync' with each others moving exactly together in space and time in an 'entangled' reality. Yet beyond plants, a closer look to Nature reveals that such collective 'in tune' behaviour is in fact an essential aspect of all life and it is found at all levels of biological organization from the symbiotic cooperation of the internal organelles of the eukaryotic cell to the evolution of organismal colonies and societies, like those of many animals including humans. Despite the general idea that biological evolution is the outcome of fierce competition among selfish parties, the evidence indicates the complex web of life is a system built on minimal conflict and instead on the substantial cooperation of units working together to create more complex systems while maintaining their own individuality at the same time.