

Talk
Bernried May 6, 2017

**„Perception as Participation“.
Aspects of phenomenology as rediscovery of the earth**

It is great to be able to tie in with the talks we had already. With Diana's presentation, the talk of Bill and also Sarah's so inspiring points. Dragos spoke how we come from the unknown and go to the unknown.

What I am going to talk about is not very new. It is more about re- membering, remembering mans deep connectedness with the earth.

Diana finished her talk with a vision by the philosopher Ernst Bloch. In this vision Bloch speaks about home as a reconstruction of the world. A world that is just and fair for man and nature.

I want to go along with this vision - a little bit. Especially I will focus on Blochs Man and nature. This **and** in his statement. Or if I say it even less defined: I will focus on the topic humans in relation to all that, that is not human, that is different, is the Other. "

How much home does a person need? That's the title of a book by a Jewish man, Jean Amery, who left Germany in the Naziera. I was diving into this title and suddenly the opposite of this question jumped up. How much Otherness do we need for feeling as a given individual?

I will circle around this topic how it unfolded itself for me in the last time. So the talk will be a bit more like story telling, not very straight or well designed. More like winding along the curves of a river.

First I want to share an experience a client told me some time ago. And while I tell this story you might remember similar experiences in your life.

This woman, Julia, was born 1941, in the midst of the second world war. She experienced a lot of violence and she and her family also had to leave their home. For months they lived in a hey barn. Food they found mainly in the forest. So most of the time they were suffering hunger.

Then, in one of these springdays the farmers living nearby invited Julia into their kitchen. Grown ups were sitting around the kichentable with a big plate full of cake. The people pushed the plate towards the little girl and said: Come, come take a piece. Yet in the moment her hands reached out to get it, they pushed the plate

away. This happened three or four or five times till the girl ran out of the kitchen into the woods, the laughter of these farmers still in her ears.

Now: There she was! Cuddled on the ground, head in her arms, eyes closed, ashamed, desperate and very hungry. Yet after a while looking up she saw this dog. A dog just sitting next to her. Julia and this dog, they looked at each other for a long time with an intense Aha- moment: Oh yes, oh we know each other. Not because we have seen each other before. Just because we both are alive, because we sense each other, we feel each other. The dog was not comforting the girl. Not at all. It was just there. Yet there was a flow of deep understanding. And then, the woman continued to tell me, something even more miraculous happened. Suddenly she, as this little child, felt the aliveness, the animatedness of everything around her. Everything, not only the dog, everything felt alive - alive in this very special way. All the things in the immediate vicinity felt animated. And they were aware of me, they responded to me, said Julia. All the springflowers, the trees around the barn, the sounds of the birds, the open fire they needed, the water, the stones in the little creek, they responded to me. Of course not with words or human language. Yet with this deep sensual potential that seems to be innate in everything.

This animatedness, this aliveness I think unfolds itself in layers. And the innermost layer might be this flow of love underneath, of which Bill was talking about so intensely.

Julia told, that this experience gave her a very, very deep feeling of being at home, being at home on this earth. A feeling that never left her totally.

Such a mode of experience seems quite strange and confusing to our modern, western ways of thinking. It lies underneath our conventional assumptions. Underneath our thinking and our spoken language. Yet: Is this mode of communication with the world therefore just an illusion? The phantastic imagination of a little child?

So another story. It leads us back to 400 years before Christ and is about Socrates. Socrates once was invited by one of his students. It is such a nice day, the student said. Come, let's walk outside of the city, let's walk in the open country. Socrates agreed and so they walked and talked and after a while were sitting down at beautiful riverside. According to the story Socrates enjoyed this walk. Yet on the way back he said: You know, I am a lover of learning. Trees or rivers, nature, even my body or the whole earth, they can not teach me anything. But other men in the town and yes, my mind, my thinking, they do.

In the times of Socrates we can find two quite different modes of dealing with the world. There was this old traditional approach where people were participating in everything in their environment. They felt as being part of more than only the human world.

On the other hand there was this new developing so-called platonic approach. An approach which wanted to understand the world, which began to analyse the world, to categorize and to classify it on a cognitive level. A mode that began to separate the people from their experiences. They no longer felt as communicating partners with their surroundings on an equal level. they followed an assumption, that only humans have a soul, can feel, yet not animals, not plants, and not at all so-called "dead matter" like stones, or wood, sand, a rivers.....Socrates and his most famous student, Plato, are seen as the very fathers of all western philosophies and sciences.

But again: who of us does not know these sometimes astonishing, in the same time very naturally arising situations: I see and I feel seen - not only by a human being, but maybe by the gaze of a flower or by a deer, maybe by a chair or a teapot or a building. Who of us does not know this experience: I touch and I feel being touched. And this not just limited to humans, but also maybe by the singing of a bird, by the wind, the crispy bark of a tree or the soft touch of a cloth.

Poetry, novels, paintings, songs, movies, music they all tell us a lot about this deep bond between humans and an animated, responding world.

It was Gregory Bateson - one of the fathers of systemic understanding - who once said: Also landscapes are able to think. Not with ideas and words, but in forms, colours, sounds and smells. Yet their thinking has no object. And he continues with a sentence - for me a breathtaking sentence: Therefore nature doesn't know accusations.

Maybe some of you know the legend about King Midas? Once King Midas did something helpful for Dionysos, a Greek god. To thank him Dionysos offered Midas a free wish. "Whatever you want, I will make it possible." Midas got very excited. Oh, he shouted, everything I touch, should turn into gold. Everything! Really wonderful just gold.

Can you imagine what happened? Bread, water, cloths, flowers, spoons, all the objects in his castle, even his daughter - everything Midas touched turned into gold. Very soon he was going to die. Just his desperate prayers to Dionysos to take away this power he gave him and to keep him alive in return, saved the life of Midas.

Can it be that under our rational analyzing view all the aliveness in relationships starts to freeze? That the so-called „objective“ facts change our aliveness, our love or mutual relationships to gold? In the mainstream of the our civilised cultures nature has become simply a stock of „resources“.

As we heard in all the talks from different perspectives, humans, we humans are tuned for relationship. The eyes, the ears, the skin, the tongue, the nostrils – all are gates. Gates, where our body receives otherness. We need all that which is other, which is non human. Which is different, is foreign to us and which is different from all of our own creations. We need Otherness for knowing who we are.

Years ago I was deeply impressed by a book with the title „Das wiedergefundene Licht“. The title means something like: Light, found again“. The author, Jacques Lusseyran, a French man, born 1924 was left blind after an accident he had as an

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eight year old boy. The book describes his experiences after the accident. He refers to possibilities of perception, which are very unusual - unusual seen from the perspective of our modern western attitudes. Experiences which made it possible for him to live like an individual, who was not blind at all. I want to mention a few of his statements, because they connect us with this nearly forgotten and neglected dimension of our daily life.

„A few days after the accident, still in the hospital, I saw the light. It came from a certain point. Emissions of light - not inside of me, not outside of me. It radiated, just light, the light. The light was there. I saw it, although I was blind. And it spread its colours, shining on all things and beings. These colours were deeply imprinted in my memory as belonging to all these things and beings.

In a dialog with a visitor Goethe once exclaimed: „What! Light you think is only here as far as you can see it! No, no! You would not be here if the light would not see you! *(read in the book of David Abram, title at the end of the talk)*

“ It is an illusion, Lusseyran writes, to believe, that objects are fixed to a specific point, bound to this point and pressed into just one specific shape. Objects are alive. Even stones. They vibrate, they tremble, they pulsate. My fingers could feel these vibrations and pulsations very clearly. By pressing my fingers quite strongly on the table, the table, the wood, responded. So my hands, which awakened to life, were leading me into a world, in which everything was an exchange.

In Europe it was phenomenology in the beginning of last century which started to question the onesidedness of the modern sciences. Edmund Husserl got more and more aware of the fact that all these sciences overlook our ordinary everyday experiences. In other countries maybe others were coming to similar understandings. Husserl got aware that in all these incredible discoveries, developments, theories and sciences something was missing. That they all overlook the world that is prior to our thoughts. Yet: it is this immediate world we count on: the ground underfoot, the clouds overhead, getting out of bed, preparing food, turning on the tap for water. And this world, Husserl noticed, is not at all objective. It is necessarily subjective and not determined. It is creative, always changing. It is ambiguous. It is multiple and openended.

This is our common field. Husserl stopped to explain experiences within this realm. He no longer tried to control or to capture them. His main focus was to become more familiar with the diverse modes of their appearances in this common field. How does this common field, he pondered, make itself evident to awareness.

Compared to the assumptions of the mainstream sciences another phenomenologist, the French philosopher Merleau- Ponty did another very radical move. He looked at a flower or a pen and asked himself: do I perceive it entirely in my head? Is it caused by myself? Solely by myself? Are they still there, if I don't look at them? Does my perception of the smell, of the texture, of the color originate solely in the pen or the flower?

Merleau- Ponty began to investigate perception as interplay. An interplay between our alive body and the world. Our bodies are not just a complicated functioning machine. There is this living, attentive body, that can take up this pen. There is this aliveness of the body. And also the world is not just passive or dead matter. In our

body there is this miraculous power to look at things or to look away, this aliveness that makes us cry or laugh or bark with the dogs at night. There is this, how Merleau-

Ponty names it, there's this mindful life of the body, the body's silent conversation with things.

And also the world is active, is sensible, is in some curious manner alive. A landscape as we experience it, is hardly just a passive determined object. It is an ambiguous realm, that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn. A color is a manner of vibrating and filling space. A thing at one moment holds itself aloof from us. At another moment it expresses itself to our senses.

At the end of his life Merleau speaks about perception as participation. He sees participation as a defining attribute of perception itself. Phenomenologically considered perception is inherently participatory.

Since hundreds and hundreds of thousand of years we humans dwell on earth. And for the largest part of our existence we negotiated relationships. Not just the relationships within our own human communities, but also with all the other living beings around us, with nearly every flapping form, with each textured surface. Oral and indigenous cultures felt and still feel as being part of their environment and are in constant communication with it. "We take better care of the earth, if we have a sense of belonging ", was a statement on the flipchart of Sarahs talk. And maybe we can continue: And we might have a sense of belonging, if we take care of the earth.

The invisible shapes of smell, the movements of shadows, the sounds of raindrops or a thunderstorm, the gentle fingers of the wind in our hair - all this provides this subtle body of our thoughts and heart, of our awareness and being in the world.

In a little poem Rilke says:

Ah, not to be cut off, not through the slightest partition shut out from the law of the stars. The inner - what is it? If not intensified sky, hurled through with birds and deep with the winds of homecoming.

If we open ourselves for the Otherness, for the aliveness of the earth, if we embrace it with all its beauty, its light, its sky and its darkness, its forms, shapes, colors and all it's vulnerability, if we open ourselves for all this with it's cycles of life and death, we begin to turn inside out. We begin to loosen our psyche from the confinement within a strictly human sphere. We might feel more fully in life and might feel more at home in life itself.

Thanks to the incredibly inspiring book „The Spell of the sensuous“ by David Abram (1997). Many of Abrams ideas – especially phenomenology – were leading the path for this talk, There are no direct quotations – yet the whole talk „lives“ from David Abrams mapping us back into the world.