
Being with the World

A Pathway to Qualitative Insight

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This article is based on a talk I gave at an international Biodynamic Agriculture conference in February 2022. You can listen to the talk at natureinstitute.org/podcast or on most podcast platforms. In reworking the talk into an article, which involved substantial editing, I strove to maintain the character of the spoken presentation. Unlike most of my other articles, this one is not accompanied by images. I want to encourage the mode of inner picturing and don't want images to distract from that activity.

I WANT TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF THE QUALITY of our experience in the world, our experience of ourselves, and our experience of nature. What qualities can we perceive in the world? What are the consequences of placing ourselves in different ways in relation to the world? Let me begin by describing different aspects of my daily experience. Perhaps you can find echoes of some of your experiences.

Each day I walk from my home about five minutes across one of Hawthorne Valley Farm's fields to The Nature Institute. I have been doing this for 20 years. And I do it in different ways. Sometimes, I don't experience much of anything that is around me. And not because I'm sleepwalking, but because my mind is full of what I have to do that day. Who do I need to contact? What do I have to write? All the issues about work fill my consciousness. I make it to The Nature Institute without any problems, but I haven't experienced anything of the world around me. Although without that world, I wouldn't have been able to get from here to there. That's one way that I often live: I'm not in my experience of the sensory world. I'm in my thoughts about what I need to do in the day ahead.

At other times, I notice things. I notice that it's cold. And I go around the back of the house, look at the thermometer and read minus 10° Celsius. That's cold. I go out onto the field and feel the icy breeze. I feel the crunching of the snow under my feet. I notice deer bounding off. I keep going. I notice that the sun is just peeking out from behind a cloud, the world is brighter now. I arrive at The Nature Institute. Noticing one thing after another, I'm more in the world than I was when caught up in my thoughts. But in this mode, nothing is taken in very deeply. I notice and register something I've perceived and move on to the next impression.

A third way of engaging happens only once in a while.

I go out onto the field and notice the glistening of the little ice crystals on the grasses. But I don't just register and move on, I actually kneel down and look carefully. I see how the glistening changes depending on my movements. I also notice that the wind from behind is really cold. Turning my face to the sun, I feel warmth. I stay for more than a moment feeling that warmth. When I move on, I notice all the tracks of the deer and then other smaller tracks. Following them, I get a sense of how the animal, probably a fox, moved through the landscape last night. In this way of being on my walk, I'm more with the world, I'm participating and taking time, as we say. Maybe I should say instead *giving* time, since when I walk in this way,

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I don't get to work in five minutes. I slow down and the world appears differently. I expand into my experience of the sense world. I move beyond noticing and registering. I dwell and participate.

Another way of engaging on my walk happens when I stop at the beginning of the field. The ground is frozen with packed snow underfoot. I think back to a month or so ago when the field was very wet. I had to walk around little puddles and my feet sank into the squishy clay soil. I ponder how the field changes through the seasons, and through the activity of the farmers and the grazing cows. In a few months the field will begin greening with the growth of the grasses and forbs. Since I walk through the field throughout the year, I can call forth memories and contemplate this place. This is not thinking about office work. It is being contemplative in the place.

Such are everyday experiences that you probably have in your own way. What's interesting for me is that the first two are the more common ones in my day-to-day life. In the first, busy with my thoughts, I'm disengaged or abstracted from sensory experience. In the second, I notice and register, bouncing in and out of meeting the phenomena around me. It's only when I begin to dwell with what appears, when I slow down, observe, describe — when I willfully give my attention to what is around me and engage as a full-bodied person — that I notice how distanced I normally am from the things around me. I realize how little I normally perceive, how disconnected I am from the world as a field of potential experience.

Events

Imagine taking five minutes every day to go outside, in whatever environment you're in. You go with the intention of inviting the world in. By world, I mean here everything that can come through sensory experience. You go with an opening gesture, an active gesture, and you perceive what comes toward you. You can notice that things appear that you've never noticed before. You feel the air moving across your cheek smoothly in a way you haven't felt before. You notice the way the light shines. You notice the feel and the texture of the soil, trying to experience consciously its sensory qualities.

While you are in this open, sauntering attitude of mind, you can be drawn into something. You begin to dwell. Participants in a recent workshop explored a fruit or vegetable in its shape, texture, color, smell, and taste and compared it with a different fruit or vegetable. All of us reported — and this was striking — observing things we'd never noticed before. And most of us had looked at and tasted these foods many times.

If you go out intentionally, and then focus and explore, the world appears fresh. It loses some of the quality — I'm speaking now out of experience — of muteness, of remoteness. I can experience myself as being more alive and then something comes toward me and engages me that has the quality of aliveness.

In contemplating this kind of experience, I realize that I'm experiencing the world as a world of events. In the registering mode we speak about facts — this tree, that apple, that shape. Facts have the quality of being clearly circumscribed; we separate them out from their spatial and temporal surroundings and register: there it is, it is that. But an event is something that happens. It happens now. It's an occurrence that is there as long as I'm participating in it. And it has a freshness. It has a vibrancy. It tingles. That is different from a fact.

What you can also notice when contemplating an event is that, during the experience, you are not separate from the world. Separation in consciousness comes when you step back and reflect. In the sensory experience I am with the world; world-in-me and me-in-world. Those are moments in which the disconnect I mentioned before is overcome.

There is a contemplative practice that can strengthen the ability to live eventfully. Towards the end of the day, I look back on my day and ask: Where did I meet something in experience that resonated? Where did I feel that I actually met something? When was I participating in an event? It's a bit embarrassing for me when I have to admit: There were hardly any such experiences today. I wasn't engaged in that way. On other days, I was. To reflect on how I was with the world can enhance qualitative perception.

Process and Transformation

The event character of the world is not the whole world. Take interacting with plants. I have a seed and I plant the seed. I know where I planted the seed; that's where noticing and registering is a really good capacity. And I come back in a few days to the place and notice that the plant is germinating. The plant is growing and developing. Each time I return I experience an event. I could register the changes: the plant has gotten bigger, now the leaves are like this, and then they're like that. I may experience wonder at each event, something of the aliveness of the plant touches me. That can help me to go further.

I "know" the plant is a developing being. If I stay in the mode of events, I'm not yet with the plant as a growing, developing being. I'm not yet with the plant's stream of life. The events are connected. To gain an intimation of the life stream of the plant, I need to engage differently. It's about awakening from a dreamy (and important) sense of the plant's aliveness to a conscious participation in it. How might I get there?

One way is through the following practice: I observe the plant. I use different senses to perceive and be with the plant actively. I feel the ridges on the stem, I notice the leaf shape and move along in touching and seeing its surface and edges. I can smell the plant. It's a kind of feeling-perceiving. Not reactive feeling, but a being-with feeling. Then I can step back, perhaps later in the day, and in my imagination consciously re-create that experience. How did the leaves smell, what was their green like, how was it different on the upper and lower surface? Through sensory engagement the plant has become part of me, and I can re-create as vividly as possible in my imagination what I perceived. I am active in a willful and feeling-imbued pictorial thinking.

I return to the plant a few days later. It has changed and I observe again. In my imagination I try to connect what we often view statically as stages of development. But there are no stages, there is continuity and ongoing transformation. I work to participate in that by letting the stem get longer in my imagination, by picturing the unfolding of the leaf. I know I am not doing exactly what the plant did, but I am entering the element of transformation that the plant lives in. I move out of a static mode of consciousness into process. I gain an intimation of the life of the plant by letting the life of willed pictorial imagination be with the plant as a process and transformation.

Process and transformation are inherent characteristics of the living world. They are everywhere around us and in us. The question is: Do we participate consciously in them or not? Stages are an artifact of our way of looking at the things. What we are dealing with is a unified process of development that we can participate in and get a sense of. The plant becomes qualitative as a living creature.

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There's another aspect I've ignored so far. Without soil, moisture, warmth, air, or light, the plant would not have germinated and developed. To do justice to the plant, I have to bring together in my imagination the sense of the whole environment of the plant that is allowing the plant to be plant. The plant is unthinkable without environment, and in this sense the environment is not outside the plant when we think of it in a living way. It's what the plant participates with to be itself. It is a potential that comes to expression in and through the plant. All language that is accessible to me seems inadequate to express this relation, since the way I phrase things suggests that what belongs together was first separate.

When I formulate relationships in contrasting ways and feel in thought a tension that arises through the juxtaposition, I get closer to reality. I can say: a plant develops out of a seed. And I can also say: the world develops through the seed into the plant. Both are correct and together they point to the reality of living relations. The plant-forming potential lies in the seed *and* in the environment. They belong together, they are not separate. What appears as plant is the result of plant-world activity. It's a coming to appearance of potentials in the environment and in the plant that belong together. The plant does not exist as a thing among things. It lives in relatedness. In this realization we overcome notions of separation that restrict our understanding of the world.

Gesture

World as event experience; world as transformation, growth, and development. Now I want to address a third layer of qualitative experience. This is the world as gesture. I'll start with an example from an area that we are all familiar with. Every day we swim in it qualitatively. Here are two sentences:

She listened to a tall tale and smiled.

She listened to a tall tree swaying in the wind and smiled.

We understand each sentence without any difficulty. When I say, "tall tale" and then "tall tree," although "tall" is the same word, the meanings differ. Yet we have no trouble understanding each out of the movement of the sentence and the context. And her smile when listening to a tall tale is not the same smile as the one accompanying the swaying of a tall tree. The words have a potential that manifests within the specific relationships. It is a highly qualitative relation to the world that we express in everyday language. We perform a remarkable qualitative weaving in meaning so easily in language. And we are hardly aware of this capacity.

The question is: Could we achieve something like this in our relation to nature? Could we find a gestural relation to what we discover in the natural world? Many people speak of "reading the book of nature." I'm not sure how much I like that metaphor, since a book as a physical thing mediates the qualitative experience of meaning, while a rock or a plant is the meaning itself. Nonetheless, the metaphor can help us see a possibility: Can we discover how the parts of something are dynamically integrated within and expressive of the larger whole of which they are a part?

Here is an example that allows me to speak out of experience. Many years ago, I was researching giraffes and came across an article by a well-known scientist, Stephen Jay Gould.¹ He claimed that the giraffe's front legs are not really longer than its back legs. They just appear to be so. I immediately thought: that's wrong. I needed to check and see if my assumption was right. So I went to the Natural History Museum in New York City and measured the length of the bones of the front legs and hind legs from a number of different specimens. My result: The front legs are definitely longer than the rear legs. Subsequently I found that other people had done such measurements and found basically what I had found. I felt confirmed. I knew something. I had the facts, the data. That felt good. I experienced the satisfaction that measurement can bring.

I also had a contrasting feeling: So what? Does it matter? It was as if I had a definition of a word, a word in isolation. But does it matter to the giraffe that its front legs are longer than its rear legs? Does this fact have meaning in the life of the giraffe?

You gain clarity when you work quantitatively. And it is fairly easy to come to agreement with others about quantities and measurements. At the same time, the numerical quantity

(40 cm long, 50 grams of protein) distances you from the full qualitative reality you are dealing with. You need to overcome the isolation of facts and quantities by finding the relations through which they take on meaning. Otherwise, facts, data, and quantities remain mute and qualitatively poor. In my work I try to discover whether seemingly isolated facts or measurements can, when re-embedded into a living context, help illuminate richer meaning.

To get beyond isolated facts you need to start relating. In the other four-legged hoofed mammals (except for the giraffe's relative, the okapi) the back legs are longer than the front legs. So there is something special about the giraffe. Both front and back legs are very long in the giraffe. In its overall form the giraffe has a short body. The body is not horizontal. When you observe a cow or a deer, you see a lovely horizontal spine. The giraffe's spine slopes upward toward the front. The front legs lengthen, the spine orients upward and from it extends, even more upright, the very long neck. Lengthening and "uprighting" occur predominantly at the front of the animal.

And there is more. The giraffe has a special joint between the last neck vertebra and the back of the skull. It allows the giraffe to extend its long head in line with the neck — something a zebra or an antelope can't do. And out of that long head it can extend its 40-centimeter-long tongue. Up, up, up. That is a gestural quality that begins to speak through the giraffe's anatomy. When I wrote about the giraffe, I spoke of "soaring upward" to point to that quality.²

To see such qualitative features of an animal I observe the anatomical features carefully and activate my mobile and exact imagination. I could also say: I'm not thinking about the parts, I'm thinking with or through them. It is a pictorial thinking that has will (effort) and feeling in it. Through actively recreating what I observe I catch glimpses of gestural expression.

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In these moments I move beyond event, and beyond transformation or process, to something appearing as an integral whole. I participate in a way that allows things to speak gesturally. And the world becomes qualitatively rich. This is something I cannot "make happen." I can work diligently in the manner I've described, but the expression, the gestural quality either appears or it doesn't. The meaning of a sentence is not found in individual words but arises in the weaving relations. It is similar in the gestural knowing of nature. It depends on the way I engage. There is no guarantee that the meaning will show itself. It is a potential gift of the interaction.

Agency: Nature Naturing

There is a layer of qualitative experience that is implicit in what I have described so far. I now need to bring it into the foreground of our attention. I invite you to consider cows with me.³ The Nature Institute is bordered on two sides by fields of Hawthorne Valley Farm. I walk through one every day. The dairy farm has a herd of about 60 milking cows. I see them often during seasons when they are out on pasture. I also go out with the farm's apprentices to observe the cows. We bring a focused attention to the herd.

Cows roam in the midst of their potential food. A cow lowers her head into the pasture plants. The tongue whips out, she enwraps and rips off the grass as her head sweeps sideways and upward. She takes about one bite per second. I've been thinking recently about where the metric of the second came from and wonder smilingly: Did it come from people observing cows grazing? The cow-grazing second is such a dynamic second, different from a clock. It's a rhythmic movement of an engaged creature, breathing in and out strongly, with rapid movements of the tongue and lips, the moist snout immersed in the pasture plants.

During the approximately eight hours a day that a cow grazes it takes around 30,000 bites and gathers about 170 pounds of fresh pasture. With every bite her mouth secretes saliva, over 20 gallons a day. That's what the veterinary books tell us. Impressive numbers. All the grasses and forbs disappear into the rumen. This voluminous inner space is populated by a microbiome that has developed out of all the microorganisms the cow has taken up from the environment, including by licking its fellow cows. This microbial world, swimming in the swallowed saliva, becomes an organ within an organ. The grasses and forbs begin to break down, the cow regurgitates cuds back up into the mouth. Usually lying, often with eyes closed, she ruminates, grinding rhythmically for 50 to 60 bites until she swallows the cud. Attending to this activity, I become quiet and calm.

The cud makes its way through the other three chambers of the stomach and the intestines. It no longer remotely resembles the pasture plants. Through all this activity, plants disappear and the cow creates cow out of what she has broken down and transformed.

In one sense it is perfectly clear: you are not what you eat; you destroy what you eat. And of course, without what you eat, you would not exist. From this perspective food is the peripheral half of a living organism. Through the interaction with pasture the cow makes cow bones, cow muscle, cow blood, and all the other organs. The cow is creating herself continually through the grass and making all sorts of substances. Think of milk, which serves both her offspring and human beings. Here a bunch of grass and there a glass of milk. In between is the cow as transforming activity.

Consider what else a cow gives off to the world. She jettisons large amounts of feces and urine — manure — out her rear end, substances that contribute to the growth of the plants that feed the cow. She also breathes out warm, moist carbon dioxide-rich air. And when she belches, she releases methane into the atmosphere. Everywhere substance transformation.

In her interactions with the world the cow takes in, transforms, creates, and gives off. A cow is activity, a cow is agency, a cow is doing, a cow is a being-at-work. So is a giraffe or a mouse; so is a plant in a different way; and so are the microbes in the soil. Everywhere we can discover organisms as activities. I call this “nature naturing,” drawing on the Latin phrase *natura naturans*. Nature naturing is nature creating itself at every moment; it is not a finished product. Here we enter a further layer of qualitative engagement and qualitative insight.

Does It Matter?

I have described four different ways of connecting with the world qualitatively: event, transformation, gesture, agency (nature naturing). When I enter these experiences, I realize: the world is a connected whole and I’m part of it. My usual distanced relation is for a few moments overcome. In those moments I consciously participate in the dynamic weaving of the world.

As human beings we continually interact with our fellow creatures — in our everyday thoughts and actions, in our technologies, in farming, in education. We too are agency, we too are beings-at-work. As human beings we also have the ability — with smaller or greater hindrances — to place ourselves in manifold ways in relation to the world that supports our existence. One possibility is distancing from the world in thought and altering it on that basis.

Some years ago, scientists interviewed 113 conventional dairy farmers in the United States about their animal welfare practices. The farmers reported that overall “they were treating their cows well, because they follow the recommendations of university and veterinary specialists.”⁴ They mentioned improved nutrition with concentrates and additives, better ventilation in the barns, and free stalls in which the animals can move around. It struck the researchers that, in describing the quality of the cow’s life, the farmers “seldom mentioned a cow preferring pasture.” On most of the farms, cows had little or no access to pasture throughout the year. (Eighty percent of dairy cows in the U.S. have no access to pasture⁵). The farmers also did not mention that the cows had been dehorned; that in many cases their tails were cut off to half length; and that such factory-farmed cows are typically slaughtered after only a few lactations due to the stresses and ailments associated with confinement husbandry practices and with having been bred to produce large amounts of milk.

Addressing the issue of factory farming in an article in a peer-reviewed journal called *Neuroethics*, a neuroscientist notes that animals suffering on factory farms is a moral issue.⁶ In his view factory farms are needed to produce adequate amounts of food for the growing human population. So what can we do? Since we can already genetically engineer mice so that they don’t feel certain types of pain, we could genetically modify cows in a similar way so that they can remain on factory farms, where they are unhealthy, but they won’t feel pain.

These are stark but not atypical examples of present-day disconnected human thought. Such disconnection leads inevitably to actions that are harmful to nature naturing. Wherever I look — in my own life, in the lives of other people, in devices and systems we have created — I see nature naturing ignored, and all too often trampled upon.

We all know what it means to not be seen, to be ignored as a human being. How do we respond? We might withdraw or we might rebel. Those are two poles of a spectrum. Now take the perspective of nature naturing and consider how it is to be ignored and manipulated by human beings who make use of you but don’t acknowledge your living qualities. What happens to your vitality? How do you respond? Do you rebel? Do you withdraw?

We can certainly see the latter in the diminished health of factory-farmed animals. We see it in the loss of biodiversity. We can see it in many ways. We can register that such things are happening. We can take steps to mitigate the problems we cause. But it is not enough if we stay in the same intellectual frame of mind that objectifies nature and is the cause of the problems. A stronger ability of human beings to be in the world qualitatively would enable us to work *with* rather than against the creative activity that is nature naturing. How might the future look if this potency could come ever more to expression in the way human beings live on earth?

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