

# The Spell of the Sensuous

Sermon by

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David Abram didn't follow the usual academic path. He worked his way through college performing as a magician, first at Alice's Restaurant in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, and later in various other venues and clubs. A master of slight-of-hand, he took a year off from his studies to travel through Europe, working as a street magician, finally meeting and studying with the noted psychiatrist, R.D. Laing, on the usefulness of magic in psychotherapy with especially difficult patients.

When he graduated with a degree in the psychology of perception, he received a grant to travel to Indonesia and Nepal to study the relationship between magic and healing with indigenous shamans. But Abram didn't find what he was looking for. Instead, he was drawn into a completely different world, a world where nature was far more than a backdrop for human affairs.

He relates one of such experience in this way: "Late one evening I stepped out of my little hut in the rice paddies of eastern Bali and found myself falling through space. Over my head the black sky was rippling with stars, densely clustered in some regions, almost blocking out the darkness between them, and more loosely scattered in other areas, pulsing and beckoning to each other. Behind them all streamed the great river of light with its several tributaries. Yet the Milky Way churned beneath me as well, for my hut was set in the middle of a large patchwork of rice paddies, separated from each other by narrow two-foot-high dikes, and these paddies were all filled with water. The surface of these pools, by day, reflected perfectly the blue sky, a reflection broken by the thin, bright green tips of new rice. But by night the stars themselves glimmered from the surface of the paddies, and the river of light whirled through the darkness underfoot as well as above; there seemed no ground in front of my feet, only the abyss of star-studded space falling away forever.

"I was no longer simply beneath the night sky, but also above it – the immediate impression was of weightlessness. I might have been able to reorient myself, to regain some sense of ground and gravity, were it not for a fact that confounded my senses entirely: between the constellations below and the constellations above drifted countless fireflies, their lights flickering like the stars, some drifting up to join the clusters of stars overhead, others, like graceful meteors, slipping down from above to join the constellations underfoot, and all these paths of light upward and downward were mirrored, as well, in the still surface of the paddies. I felt myself at times falling through space, at other moments floating and drifting. I simply could not dispel the profound vertigo and giddiness; the paths of the fireflies, and their reflections in the water's surface, held me in a sustained trance. Even after I crawled back to my hut and shut the door on this whirling world, I felt that now the little room in which I lay was itself floating free of earth."

David Abram didn't find the healers he expected, either. His slight-of-hand skills provided an entry into the shaman's world as they recognized him as a co-worker in the shaping of human perception. But he soon discovered that, contrary to the idea of shamans as medicine men and healers, they saw their roles very differently, and healing was only a small part of it. They lived on the physical and cultural boundaries between the human and other-than-human communities, and their primary role was as intermediaries between these two worlds.

These shamans worked to maintain what we would call the ecological balance between humans and nature, understanding what humans needed to give and could safely take from the land. From this perspective, healing was a matter of restoring the balance of a community's relationship with its surroundings. Part of what can be called the shaman's magic is found in his ability to enter into the life-worlds of non-human creatures and the land, appreciating them as multiple intelligences in their own right that can speak and listen, albeit in non-human ways.

David Abram learned that these indigenous peoples lived in a very different world than the one he'd left behind. One day he noticed his Balinese hostess carrying a tray containing many little boat-shaped green plates, each woven from a freshly cut section of palm frond, each with a mound of white rice. Asked what they were for, she answered that they were offerings for the household spirits. He saw that she set them down at certain places in the woods around the area and spied to see what happened. The rice was carried off by ants – different ants from different colonies in each spot. At first he chuckled at the irony of this, but then realized that, whatever else this represented, it was an amazingly effective manner of insect control! In this lush jungle it would be easy for a home to be overrun with insects, but this practice of offerings to the household spirits created a behavioral boundary which kept them happy and away.

Abram further reflected that, in a community that doesn't have a non-physical realm of disembodied "spirit," the dead – whether human, plant, or animal – would remain within the natural environment. Breath, body, leaves, and waste would all eventually become part of new creation. In a world like this, the dead would be always with us, as was expressed in an anonymous poem many of us heard for the first time in the film, "Four Weddings and a Funeral",

Do not stand at my grave and weep  
I am not there, I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glint on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
When you wake in the morning hush  
I am the swift, uplifting rush  
of quiet birds in circling flight.  
I am the soft starlight at night.  
Do not stand at my grave and weep.  
I am not there. I do not sleep.

Unlike those who claim that it is language that makes us human, those living in such an intimate relationship with the world experience language and speech as something inherent in all of nature. Winds, rains, mountains speak. Insects, birds, and

animals speak. All have sounds that convey useful information to the hunter-gatherer living close to the land.

To these indigenous people, nature was the great teacher, the source not only of food and building materials, but of wisdom as well. Living in such intimate harmony with nature was so drastically different from life in the civilized West that, when he returned from his year in Indonesia and Nepal, David Abrams was consumed with a passion to understand the roots of this difference, how and why we had lost all the richness he had experienced. His book, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, was the result.

Abram's work included research into philosophy, history of perception, and cultural evolution. But he found the basic turning point, the single element that made the greatest difference in how humans perceive and live in the world, was the rise of literacy.

He looked to the first cultures that structured their worldviews as humans separate from nature – the Hebrews and the Greeks, and found the main thing they had in common was that theirs were the first cultures based on alphabetic writing. The Hebrews, who conceived of a God that demanded that they abandon the nature worship of their ancestors, used a set of symbols for consonants only, vowel sounds were not written; being of the breath, they were considered spiritual. This gave their writing a sense of the sacred, which remains at the heart of the Kabbalah to this day.

The Greeks, on the other hand, converted the Hebrew symbols into an abstract representation of the sounds of speech, including vowels. In so doing, they created a system of communication that was completely separate from symbols, stories, or images of the natural world, and which supported a kind of abstract thought that was impossible in an oral culture.

This development can be seen in the works of Plato, the first completely literate philosopher. In the dialog, *Phaedrus*, Socrates responds to an invitation to leave Athens for a walk in the country by saying, "You must forgive me, dear friend. I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do." The Greek epics are full of gods and messages found in nature. Socrates' claim that trees and open country can't teach him anything would be an extremely odd thing for a Greek to say.

Abrams wrote that, "prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like "virtue," "justice," and "temperance" were thoroughly entwined with the situations in which those qualities were exhibited. The terms for such qualities were oral utterances called forth by particular social situations; they had no apparent existence independent of those situations. . . . Yet as soon as such utterances were recorded in writing, they acquired an autonomy and permanence hitherto unknown. Once written down, "virtue" was seen to have an unchanging visible form independent of the speaker – and independent as well of the corporeal situations and individuals that exhibited it." This gave rise to the world of Platonic Ideals, where abstract ideas were considered to be real, while things that could be seen and touched were regarded as derivative, less than real. The Platonic worldview, like the letters of the alphabet, does not exist in the world of ordinary vision.

Abrams points out that "the process of learning to read and write with the alphabet engenders a new, profoundly reflexive, sense of self. The capacity to view and even to dialogue with one's own words after writing them down . . . enables a new sense of

autonomy and independence from others, and even from the sensuous surroundings that had earlier been one's constant interlocutor. The fact that one's scripted words can be returned to and pondered at any time that one chooses . . . grants a timeless quality to this new reflective self, a sense of the relative independence of one's verbal, speaking self from the breathing body with its shifting needs. The literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal experience.

This shift inevitably leads to a new sense of a separate self, which Plato called psyche, that grows stronger and more stable the further it travels into the world of ideas, of abstractions. And this shift leads, eventually, almost inevitably, to Descartes' separation of the thinking world of selfhood from the concrete world of physicality. And once the assumption is made that only humans possess this special gift of entering into the hyper-real world of disembodied thought, the door is opened to the unreflectively arrogant domination and exploitation of animals, the earth, and even other people who are deemed to have an inferior intellectual potential.

I recall E.E. Cummings' poem,

pity this busy monster, manunkind,

not. Progress is a comfortable disease:  
your victim (death and life safely beyond)

plays with the bigness of his littleness  
--- electrons deify one razorblade  
into a mountainrange; lenses extend  
unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish  
returns on its unself.

A world of made  
is not a world of born --- pity poor flesh

and trees, poor stars and stones, but never this  
fine specimen of hypermagical

ultraomnipotence. We doctors know

a hopeless case if --- listen: there's a hell  
of a good universe next door; let's go

While Abram would agree with Cummings in principle, he is both more optimistic and specific about how to recover what has been lost. He points out that the ability to merge with one's environment which preliterate cultures enjoyed with such richness is still available to us today. In fact, he finds that we use it all the time! When we look at abstract marks of ink on a page and we hear sounds, see visions, feel sensations, and more – when we enter into lifeworlds not of our own making, we are using the same ability present in all humans in all cultures. We're just using that ability to connect with abstractions rather than objective reality. He freely admits the advantages and strengths of our doing so, but points out the downside: we grow separate from each other, from nature, and even from our true relational selves.

As a remedy, Abram calls for a literal spiritual renewal, “spirit” being the word for “air,” for “breath.” He says that it is within our grasp to reawaken to the unity of all life by attending to the physical and spiritual basis of our embodied selves. He notes that the ecological disasters we have created are the natural outcome of our separation from nature.

It has been observed that, in order to kill a human being, you have to make that person less than fully human in your eyes: a thing, an idea, an irritant. The same is true of our own world. If we could perceive our world as a living, breathing, intelligent entity of which we are a part, ecological agendas would be unnecessary. We would then be able to love the world and each other even as we love our selves. It has been observed that, in order to kill a human being, you have to make that person less than fully human in your eyes: a thing, an idea, an irritant. The same is true of our own world. If we could perceive our world as a living, breathing, intelligent entity of which we are a part, ecological agendas would be unnecessary. We would then be able to love the world and each other even as we love our selves.

May it be so.

