

MEETING LANDSCAPE: AN INSTANCE AT THE SEASHORE

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“The landscape becomes reflective, human and thinks itself through me...I become the subjective consciousness of the landscape, and my painting becomes the objective consciousness.” — Paul Cezanne

MEETING ME

From early age I have been a geographer at heart. Where family and others around me could not listen, what I could not approach within myself with presence at that age, was welcome and could find space in nature. I have always spent much time cycling in the countryside, hiking in the mountains, walking along the beach or in the forest, entering a space that carried words like acceptance, potential, refuge but also the challenges of weather and terrain. For me the natural environment became a career. It is where I wanted to spend most of my time and what I wanted to know most about.

So I studied physical geography at university and am now professor. Ironically, following this path became a journey of disconnection and objectification of that what I wanted to relate to most. What I could say in my scientific papers was a certain kind of information and understanding, but never that what gave me personal meaning or satisfaction. A deep dissatisfaction developed as I split off an inner voice that needed to be listened to but became disconnected from my awareness. 2006 was a year that culminated by being at home with burn-out symptoms. It was then that I started Russell Delman’s Embodied Life Programme and Focusing, and I started *listening* again—a geographer of *inner territories*, if you like. This writing is the gift back to that voice that was lost, a new way of exploring how to be with that what I call nature, new ways of meeting, interacting with, and creating understanding about landscape.

MEETING LANDSCAPE

The restorative capacity of nature is a wonderful thing. As Schroeder (2008) so nicely puts it: nature has no needs of its own. It is complete in itself and makes no demands on me. There is an invitation to let go, for body tensions to relax, simply because we are in a different environment. From a Focusing perspective this comes as no surprise. We know ourselves as embodied beings, always from moment to moment responsive to our

ever-changing situational interactions with our environment. There are many times when walking my dog along the forest road, that in the process of letting-go, more subtle embodied sensations come alive calling my attention. It is a great time for solo-Focusing without external distractions. And as I'm writing, it feels so incomplete to say this. It is not actually a time of solo-Focusing. Without the presence of the trees, the grass around me, an essential support would be missing. I can be self-in-presence for what is alive in me, but my presence is much supported by the larger presence of the nature that surrounds me. I am physically supported by the life in the trees that surround me in the same way the ground supports my feet.

Meeting landscape as a Focuser is a peculiar thing. There's something I call a *felt sense of nature*, but I'm not always quite sure whether I'm the Focuser or the companion in this relationship. The interaction is always both ways. In the words of Abram (2010) there is always reciprocity in meeting nature. In meeting the ground my feet are supported, a responsiveness that brings a vital upwardness through my skeletal posture. But this ground is also imprinted by my weight, just the way I place my feet becomes exactly mirrored in the soft earth I impress. The air that brushes the skin on my face is also itself altered by this encounter. I am not only the Focuser in this relationship, checking within myself how this dark tall pine tree may bring a sense of stern stability and groundedness. I often feel myself being the companion of nature, just listening to what it wants to communicate to me. I present here just one instance of such a meeting and from there what meaning has come for me to date.

AN INSTANCE AT THE SEASHORE

In the text below I describe the development of my inner experiencing during a cold windy day at the coast of Fårö, a small limestone island in the Baltic Sea. It was the last day of a fieldwork with students, the work was done, and it was one of these letting-go moments where I could freshly open up to my surroundings. The encounter was maybe 15–20 minutes.

Just a few considerations. First, I did not write this while standing at the coast, but two hours later while enjoying a warm cappuccino in a museum café. While re-embodiment the experience as much as possible, there is also a further explicating than what I could have done in the field. This is inevitable. Also inevitable is the necessity of writing, using words that are pointers, metaphors, and inadequate representations of what was a felt experience. Every Focuser knows the inadequacy of words and that whatever gets expressed does not necessarily make sense to the companion. As my companion-listener reading this, I do not expect an understanding, but just an acceptance by you of whatever below does not make sense. Following the text, I will explicate about the process and what meaning I gained from it.



I stand on a limestone sea stack, overlooking the sea and the land behind me. I ‘drop in’ with my attention, letting go of discursive thought, self-in-presence. Expanding my sense of self to include the environment around me, sensing outward through the skin, becoming permeable to my surroundings: a meeting unfolds . . .

A vast expanse of sky drives across the sea
Waves and clouds torn in a violent space
Turbulent air edges itself in gaps between trees, rock, walls
Grass fluidly yields to this motion
Stiff trees are punished by torn leaves.

Water splinters against granular reefs
The Silurian substance of calcareous shelves holds out
But wave upon wave skin is lost
Rock falls away by the inevitability of impermanence
Objects transformed by the insubstantial.

Caught by waves and cast ashore
Bones of rock tossed, grounded
Into piles of clinker
Caught and lost as fast as perceived
In his next breath.

Wordless motion
Of space manifest
He is his environment.

His skin contracts to huddle this self
Like a hermit crab he feels.
His clothing pulled at and torn sunder
By the sharp nails of the chill.
Respectless of human design the cold probes
The tissue beneath his skin.

His posture changes to hold out
And protect his inner vulnerability
Against this violent nature
This transformed surrounding at odds with itself.

The pulse in the veins
The ebb and flow in the chest
Bridge the outer turbulent chaos
To an inner expanse of alive and silent space.
Filled with potential
An open invitation
What comes with the next breath?

The cold air etches out
The sharply defined boundary of his outlines.
His attention falls inward into
This sharply articulated embodied self.
The I emerges stable
His body faces the relentless outer
Trailing a wake of shifting quiet in its lee.

History emerges in this transparent space.
Words ripple the surface of the immaculate silence
The pond of his awareness.
Tremblings, flutterings in attention
That fall back and forth between self and it.

Objects emerge by name and label.
Entities are obtained by definition:
Roundness, dimension and form.
The whole of the moment shatters
Into a myriad complexity
Of objects and relations.

The constancy of the moment is pulled,
Stretched into past, present and future.
The needling wind feels uncomfortable now,
Its quality judged into cold.
Thrashing waves emerge as distinct from howling wind;
Trees sharply contrasted against the rushing clouds.
Unity lost, the material emerges
Into the eye, the ear, nose and skin.

History comes to the fore
His feet know the clinker
His thoughts abstract their huddled rumblings
Into abrasion and littoral drift.
Beach lines form
According to their angle of internal friction.
Deposit upon deposit
Become invaded by lichen and juniper,
Pine and grass.
Time emerges as this island rebounds
Out of the Baltic.

This landscape can be known by the mind
Through experience and word.
But only by standing here
Can he value its meaning and give it significance
In his own existence.
Something has been learned;
The thinking mind the last to know
As it makes sense
Of this body at the seashore.

COMMENTARY ON THE TEXT

A general comment to myself is the observation that whenever I describe these types of experiences, my sentences become shorter and more metaphorical. The intention is to describe as accurately as possible an experience, rather than be poetic. And this is never achieved: “*I cannot attain the intensity that is unfolded before my senses*” (Paul Cezanne in Merleau-Ponty, 1969).

Lines 1-17: Many words to describe a single moment of experience. They offer a first description and acknowledging of what is simply alive in this moment of meeting—the equivalent of describing a felt sense in a Focusing session.

Line 8 uses ‘Silurian’, a geological term for the age of the limestone. For me it brings a precision that distinguishes this particular limestone from another one—it is very place-

specific and carries detail that could be explained in another page of writing. My scientific understanding is part of my embodied knowing of this place and enriches it.

There is also a strange timelessness in this section. Lines 1-7 are placed in the ‘now’, but what follows is a juxtaposition of time: the presentation of the Silurian shelf speaks of its impermanence, the sound of a clunking stone speaks of its abrasion. None of this is presented as thought, but as instantaneous awareness of landscape across time (lines 16-17). The all of it lives within a single breath.

Lines 19-21: A summary of my self-awareness when experiencing lines 1-17. See also the text in the next section.

Lines 23-33: Again, many words to describe the moment when standing exposed on the sea stack with the wind blowing, I got cold. The discomfort of cold brings a renewed bodily awareness, a need to contract. Attention shifts from outer to inner environment. The inner self feels vulnerable in comparison to the power of nature. This is an interesting specific of this moment: I often feel much inner empowerment when embracing the forces of nature. Here, it is a separating movement, rather than an embracing.

Lines 35-49: The describing completes itself by differentiating between an inner spaciousness that feels alive, silent and full of potential, in contrast to the sensations of cold in the skin that clearly outline my body. Lines 47-49 place the self in relation to the outer environment.

Lines 51-55 describe a first sign of awakening of discursive thought. There is a very delicate moving back and forth between pure sensing and first thought, described here as a ‘rippings, tremblings, flutterings’.

Lines 57-62 describe the falling back into ‘normal’ daily awareness. The totality of the moment here falls apart into objects with names and their spatial relations. I recognize in this a shifting from predominantly parallel-processing, right brain to linear-processing, left brain awareness (Bolte Taylor, 2008).

Lines 64-71: Linearity of time returns in contrast to the ‘constancy of moment’ earlier. The emergence of thought also brings a *judgment* of ‘cold’, rather than the previous description of a ‘needling’ sensation. Body parts are now distinguished.

Lines 73-83: Simple thoughts now become a stream of mental observing of the environment, including its mental commentaries. My discursive mind returns to include the evaluation of coastal beach lines and how they over time become invaded by vegetation.

Lines 85-93: This moment of being in nature, rather than evaluating or talking about it, having this embodied interaction, allowing a felt sense of the environment to develop, I am left with a sense of deep connectedness with life that gives personal meaning and a sense of belonging. I get much relief and support from an embodied knowing that a sense of belonging is no longer place-bound. (Greg Madison (2009) describes the loss of a sense of belonging that is felt by people who voluntarily migrated and no longer quite fit the place they left, nor quite fit the place they have arrived in. Being a voluntary migrant myself who

knows that space very well, it is a tremendous support to know this inner connectedness where I *do* belong.)

FOCUSING AND THE LIVING FORWARD OF UNFOLDING NATURE

“Wordless motion of space manifest”, as I read this again I am deeply touched once more by the depth of the encounter and the offering made. The instance described works itself from the depth of the meeting back into normal discursive awareness.

I need to understand the meeting itself, who meets whom and where is my attention placed? In the depth of the encounter I am companion to the landscape. As self-in-presence the whole of me stands open to the way my environment presents itself, a whole-body companion rather than a whole-body Focuser. I need to emphasize the not-only-visual aspect of this listening to and presenting by landscape. Whole-body companionship, as in how we know Whole-Body Focusing, really captures it—the all of me meeting this instance, rather than looking-at what surrounds me. In placing my attention open to my surroundings, I invite my environment to present itself through my subjective awareness. Subjective, but the presentation is very specific and full with detail, intricacy, and complexity. As with the felt sense in Focusing, this expression of landscape develops in the meeting. It is fresh, new and unique. Through my receiving, accepting, and acknowledging what is presented, a next step unfolds.

In my experience with most people who know Focusing there is at this point a looking for a felt sense within themselves, answering a question like, “What comes *for me* when standing in this place at this moment?” We then listen to our own response to what surrounds us and describe that. Our attention falls within ourselves, and we follow the unfolding of that. The distinction I make here is, rather than follow my own inner responses, I remain self-in-presence, a sensing companion to what surrounds me, and let that unfold within and before me. Thus, my attention does not fully fall inside me, but maintains a receiving attitude, a receptiveness to the larger-than-self landscape that presents itself before me, surrounds me, envelops me. Of course, whatever emerges is sensed through and projected onto my embodied awareness, and I don’t at any point deny what is real within me.

For example, I describe the discomfort of cold that brings a renewed bodily awareness, a need to contract. Attention shifts from outer to inner environment. In ‘The Absent Body’ Leder (1990) observes how we tend to remain unaware of our embodiment until we perceive some discomfort or pain. I would guess this may be true also for many of us Focusers. It is when we feel discomfort that our attention goes in to listen. When we feel ok, we simply live our lives. It is interesting for me to note this retracting of attention and change to at least a partial self-absorbedness. But while I continue to attend to my never ending self-improvement and momentary needs, I may lose the capacity to listen to the less vocal voices and interactions that come from the OK places within and without myself; exactly there where nourishment may be found. I guess this simply points, once again, to the importance

of being self-in-presence. A capacity to maintain a permeability to nature around me allows my own self-in presence to be supported by life itself.

The landscape unfolds itself before me. It is no longer something static, but a living entity that is dynamic, has its own life and possesses its own forward living. Whatever comes next is only made possible by my being there for it. Paul Cezanne expressed this beautifully in the opening quotation of this essay. For him it was an intense struggle to, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, “make visible how the world touches us” (Merleau-Ponty, 1969, p.244).

Maybe it is this that gives most meaning to me in meeting landscape. My being becomes an instrument for the unfolding of nature, at least something larger than myself. In contrast to an egotistical or narcissistic expression of individuality, I experience this as a falling away of self-absorbedness that allows a deeper meaning, *a deeper reciprocity from nature*, to unfold. I also need to acknowledge that most of these processes I do in natural environments. How does a large city or industrial area present itself? The unfolding of culture I’m sure has equally much to tell. But I need to be there for it, make the time to listen.

The understanding developed in discursive thinking described towards the end of my instance, falls back into linear time, three-dimensional space and a world filled with objects. In the process of returning to my academically-socialized self, the movement is from proximity to distance, relatedness to disconnectedness, subjective to objective. There are many of these tensions in meeting landscape that have long been recognized and described by geographers (Wylie, 2007). Inevitably, individual thinkers have emphasized one or other perspective and claimed reality. As humanity more and more has fallen into identification with the thinking mind, our perception of the world has become more and more objective, distant and disconnected (Abram, 1996). The conceptual understanding of landscape that I practice in my daily work as a scientist is inherently and intentionally disconnected from the experiential. Because of that science can never provide meaning.

What Focusing brings back for me is an effective way of reconstituting an embodied relatedness, not only to ourselves, but also explicitly to the world we inhabit, dwell in, are immersed in every moment. The connectedness that I am left with at the end of my instance is maybe what it is all about. Work with students that brings them in embodied interaction with environment opens up a new capacity for re-discovering a meaningful relationship with our planet. Here is an educational model that can be truly transformative towards a sustainable development of society.

Gene Gendlin asked me a few years ago whether his philosophy of the implicit also applies to Earth. It’s a big question that I cannot yet answer. However, in my meeting with Earth I experience myself as inherently part of Earth. When I take time to listen, Earth/nature presents itself full of intricate complexity that is specific to that situated instance and that, given my self-in-presence, unfolds in important ways through me. From this point of view Earth can only know itself through human consciousness. Accepting myself as unfolded through Earth’s evolution, it is essential that I listen to who I am. In this way my work as a scientist can carry forward the unfolding of Earth.

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