

Language, Consciousness and Identity

Preface: Human development is model dependent. Of near unlimited possibility, only those capacities that are modeled in the environment will open and develop. No model, no capacity; summarizing Joseph Chilton Pearce on the 'Model Imperative.' Joe often shared that a lack of modeling can cause a complete capacity to disappear in one generation, with the new generation not missing or even being aware of what has been lost. This sets the stage for what we describe below as 'The Missing Mind' and the way symbolic-metaphoric language, science and technology empowers and blinds.

The overwhelming power of the neocortex to create mental images shapes human consciousness. Language is a defining force. The form, structure and pervasive use of language pre-defines and organizes what we perceive, including how we perceive ourselves, and this, of course, implies how we relate to everything.

Physicist David Bohm described how matter dissolves seamlessly into energy. There are no sharp edges that define a 'thing' from something else. Edges that define are more a statement of the observer's point of view than the ultimate nature of what is being observed. The structure of the human eye, for example, persistence of vision and other qualities, 'represent' the swirling movement of energies, one-part hydrogen plus two parts oxygen, as a stream. There is no stream as an independent 'thing.' What we experience as an independent thing, a stream, is a representation, an appearance. The movement of various energies 'appears' to be independent and solid. That 'thingness' disappears at finer resolutions.

Upon this 'representational-bias,' language emerged, further abstracting the nature of reality. Dynamic, moving, reciprocal, and living processes are chopped up, fragmented and rearranged into discreet words, subjects and objects. The empathic, entangled and reciprocal nature of living systems, life and all living processes are dissected and isolated as discrete 'things.' These abstracted parts are then arranged in sequences we call thoughts, sentences and consciousness, including how we perceive and identify ourselves, you, me, and all other lifeforms.



Cubism is a nice metaphor. Instead of swirling, merging and changing patterns of energies, we see Picasso's frozen cubes arranged, stacked and teetering. Syntax, the structure of how words and discrete linguistic units called morphemes combine to form phrases and sentences, chop living processes into cubes, and that 'cubing' is what our brain images as thought. And that determines how we treat ourselves, others, and the natural world.

During a Bohm inspired Dialogue event, Leroy Little Bear, a Blackfoot researcher and professor emeritus, explained how the indigenous world-view is embedded in its language. The word 'leaf,' in the native language, for example, is a verb, 'leafing,' representing a process, not a separate 'thing.' The Western language, and therefore mind, sees a leaf, a discrete thing, separate, independent, abstracted from infinite flow of dynamic forces which creates the appearance of a tree.

Tom Cowan, MD, delights in sharing the story of how early Europeans assumed Native People were crazy because they talked to trees. Tom mused, "when Europeans talked to trees, the trees did not answer, so the natives must be crazy. Why would a tree talk to a European who chops down trees, and if they did talk, why would the trees speak German or Spanish?" Language pre-defines and organizes what we perceive, including how we relate to everything. As long as the mind is completely shaped and occupied by the cube-structure imposed by language, this very structure pushes aside and negates all the ways of knowing that do not fit neatly into cubes.

There is a fundamental organizing relationship between language, thought, consciousness and identity, that exclude other non-verbal forms of perception, relationship, communion, and knowing. The baby I call 'entangled empathy' gets tossed out with the excluded bath water. We become and live our lives colorblind to immanence, that interdependent, empathic, entanglement we actual are.

We are fish swimming in an abstracted cubist virtual reality that blinds us to the way this form and structure predefines our reality, excluding everything that does not fit neatly into our abstract word cubes. One needs to step out of the enchantment words impose to experience this life giving and saving truth of our authentic nature, which is nature. We are swirling creation, life, creation, and the essence of nature, not a noun, Michael or a thing.

Please consider how this pre-defined virtual reality structure completely fills our consciousness, excluding all other ways of knowing and relating. From eighteen months forward the dominate environmental stimulus is naming, spoken language and story. Then comes the alphabet, reading and writing, followed by twelve to twenty years or more of intense academic training, amplified and exponentially by all forms of nonliving mechanical media. Every second of this indoctrination is spent more or less isolated for the natural world, resonating and reinforcing our cubist defined, subject-object reality. There is little room or space for anything else.

Being compulsively addicted to, and identified with this fragmented subject-object cubist reality, the tool we call symbolic imagination, no longer satisfied to be simply a tool, began screaming so loudly that *it* assumed *it* is driving the bus. So dominate is this display that all other voices, ways of knowing and relating, are negated, leaving one voice, that of a Monarch-Dictator that is collectively projected outwardly as culture. Ego is the name given to the inward experience of this phantom entity. The same phantom projected outward becomes culture. The root of each representation is the same.

Empathy is one of many excluded voices. Empathy is an embodied, felt experience, a process, not a thing or object. When empathy is active it creates a completely different context for our cubist abstractions than when empathy is absent. In very real and tangible ways the qualities of mind that are most often excluded, that do not fit in our neat language cubes, have the potential of profoundly altering the meaning found in thought, memory, relationship and identity. Looking deeper we discover that these excluded qualities are, in fact, the most important, the most representative of our true authentic nature.

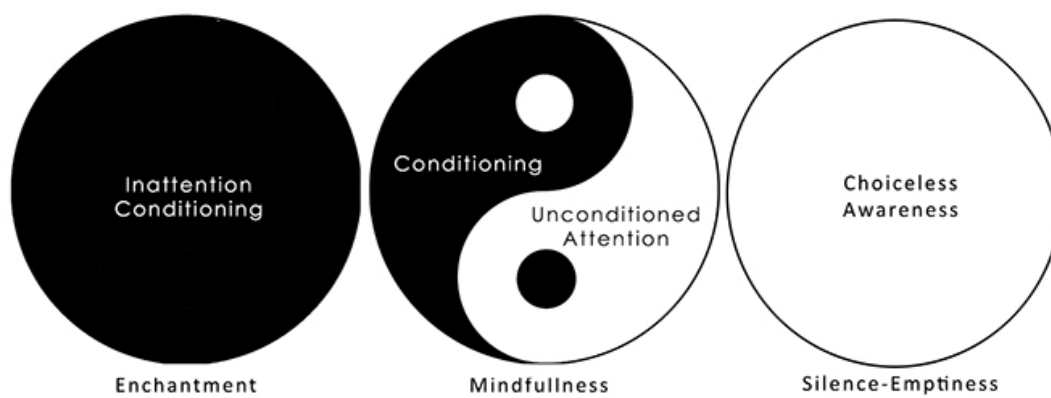
It is as if something flipped the default state of human consciousness. An important but minor capacity, symbolic imagination as a creative tool, displaced the actual, the more fundamental, our entangled interdependent relationship with all life, and stole center stage of our attention, completely enchanting the mental display we call consciousness, and did so completely that we lost touch with what is real, true and immediate.

Unnoticed, a fundamental, systemic and pervasive 'misuse of memory' evolved, and kept evolving like a runaway train. Having invested twenty-five years of his scientific life and mind to this, David Bohm described how this 'misuse of memory' operates mechanically, as a reflex, chugging along swiftly beneath the level of our awareness. What we call 'thinking' is, on close examination, simply the shadow display of what has already happened. Dave observed that our habitual, 'normal' state of attention is quite low, rendering the forces at play beneath appearances rarely seen. We are too busy watching the show to notice what we are doing.

A different quality or intensity of attention is required to lift our conscious awareness out of the mechanical reflex system, which is the stated intent or goal of many so called spiritual practices; meditation, watching the breath, repeating mantras, various yogas, etc. Regardless of the method, the practice evokes a change in the state of the mind. This change acts like switching on the lights in a theater. We become aware, conscious, of our self-induced enchantment. In the light of this new quality of attention we become aware of what is habitual, like seeing the trick of a magician, the trick or illusion we are playing on our self and others all day long. The enchantment the Rishis called Maya, is seen for what it is. With the lights of attention on, the power of the enchantment to hypnotize fades. We are 'transformed by the renewing of our mind,' as the good book says.

Joseph Chilton Pearce called these sudden bursts of deeper, wider awareness, 'Cracks in our Cosmic Egg.' These flashes of insight evoke a sudden and fundamental changes in our self-world-view, our construct of reality. Joe also notes that the power of enchantment swiftly scars over the crack, negating this transforming power.

Appreciating this dynamic, the Buddhist tradition uses the phrase, 'Always Awakening,' to describe the need to live in a constant state of awakening attention, or simply mindfulness. Like Ying and Yang, the power of enchantment is balanced by mindfulness. With mindfulness we see enchantment for what it is. Without this 'above normal quality of attention' we see only enchantment. Being mindful of our self-induced enchantment simultaneously implies the direct experience of pure unconditioned attention. This 'awakening' establishes a new default state for consciousness and intelligence. This new silent Always Awakening context opens the doors of perception to 'insight' inviting in all the states of perception, direct experience and knowing, that are excluded by our habitual word-based state of enchantment.



Cycling back to Tom's story about tree talking. Mindfulness's reality expanding, enchantment busting force, broadens the nature and quality of the languages we can share, with sensitive empathic resonance being the translator. Estimates in 2009 classified 6,909 distinct human languages. I only speak one. Awakening from our single language-thought-consciousness-identity-enchantment invites other modes of being, other ways of listening and relating. We sensitively assume that each living species is expressing its needs and essence in a unique language. Always Awakening or mindfulness, alert, sensitive, silent attention, with its expanding empathic resonance, attunes us in ways that are increasingly open, inviting and sensitive to each.

A simple example, I served on the board of the local ballet company. Immersing myself in the lived experience and this Olympic class artistry, I discovered that ballet is a language, inspired by music, yet another language, and often story, with the human body, like a tree, speaking, if I am sensitive enough, quiet and attuned enough to listen. This quiet, attuned sensitivity translates into immediate and direct perceptual literacy.

Bees and other insects are thousands of times more sensitive to the language each plant speaks than humans, pheromones and pollen, and are able to detect and follow scents for miles. Using Tom's story, "flowers are talking to bees." The song of humpback whales can be heard thousands of miles from the singing whale. The capacity to hear and to interpret varies profoundly on the listener's physical capacity, and perhaps equally, their sensitive attunement and literacy with each language. Obviously some are more sensitive and fluent with foreign languages than others. The power of symbols and metaphors to stimulate enchanting mental images renders us deaf and blind to all other excluded forms. In similar ways science and technology empower and simultaneously blind.

I have been touched deeply and inspired by chapters; "The Missing Mind: Contrasting Civilization with Non-Civilization Development and Functioning," and "Practical Wisdom," by Darcia Narvaez and Mary S. Tarsha. With full academic rigor the authors document the historical context and developmental significance of Tom's 'tree talking' story. They explore and document why we are deaf and blind to so many subtle forms of communication and empathic relationships that result in so much harm to all of humanity and to nature. We, indeed, are suffering from a missing mind. Darcia and her colleague strike a central nerve that runs through all of my mentors and teachers; Montagu, Prescott, Pearce, Bohm, Krishnamurti, Maté, prenatal psychology, child development, education, and more. To fully appreciate what this 'missing mind' means, please absorb the abridged attachments.

“Before Satori we chop wood and carry water. After Satori we chop wood and carry water.” The profound difference being; with mindfulness creative imagination, thought and knowledge, are grounded, seen and used as powerful tools in the service of something far more important and fundamental, our true authentic nature. Without this larger living context creative imagination, thought and knowledge, remain abstract, self-referencing, not grounded in anything larger. Imagined thought, the ego, culture, and its twins, artificial intelligence and machines, serves only its selfish needs and desires because that is all there is.

Imagined thought, the ego and culture, which includes its technologies, is incapable of going beyond its isolated, selfish and predatory house of mirrors. This returns us to David Bohm and one of his most important statements;

We are faced with a breakdown of general social order and human values that threatens stability throughout the world. Existing knowledge cannot meet this challenge. Something much deeper is needed, a completely new approach. I am suggesting that the very means by which we try to solve our problems is the problem. The source of our problems is within the structure of thought itself.

Environmental educator David Orr, shares Bohm’s seminal insight, expressing it more directly in 1994;

Much of the current debate about educational standards and reforms, however, is driven by the belief that we must prepare the young only to compete effectively in the global economy. That done, all will be well, or so it is assumed. But there are better reasons to reform education, [and to raise our children], which have to do with the rapid decline in the habitability of the earth. The kind of discipline-centric education that enabled us to industrialize the earth will not necessarily help us heal the damage caused by industrialization. Yale University historian Paul Kennedy (1993), after surveying the century ahead, reached broadly similar conclusions, calling for “nothing less than the re-education of humankind.”

Yet we continue to educate the young for the most part as if there were no planetary emergency. It is widely assumed that environmental problems will be solved by technology of one sort or another. Better technology can certainly help, but the crisis is not first and foremost one of technology. Rather, it is a crisis within the minds that develop and use technology. The disordering of ecological systems and of the great bio-geochemical cycles of the earth reflects a prior disorder in the thought, perception, imagination, intellectual priorities, and loyalties inherent in the industrial mind. Ultimately, then, the ecological crisis concerns how we think and the institutions that purport to shape and refine the capacity to think.

The truth is that many things on which our future health and prosperity depend are in dire jeopardy: climate stability, the resilience and productivity of natural systems, the beauty of the natural world, and bio-logical diversity.

It is worth noting that this [destruction of the environment, of nature] is not the work of ignorant people. Rather, it is largely the results of work by people with BAs, BSs, LLBs, MBAs, and PhDs. Elie Wiesel once made the same point, noting that the designers and perpetrators of Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald-the Holocaust-were the heirs of Kant and Goethe, widely thought to be the best educated people on earth. But their education did not serve as an adequate barrier to barbarity. What was wrong with their education? In Wiesel's (1990) words,

It emphasized theories instead of values, concepts rather than human beings, abstraction rather than consciousness, answers instead of questions, ideology and efficiency rather than conscience.

I believe that the same could be said of our education. Toward the natural world it too emphasizes theories, not values; abstraction rather than consciousness; neat answers instead of questions; and technical efficiency over conscience. It is a matter of no small consequence that the only people who have lived sustainably on the planet for any length of time could not read, or like the Amish do not make a fetish of reading. My point is simply that education is no guarantee of decency, prudence, or wisdom. More of the same kind of education will only compound our problems.

This is not an argument for ignorance but rather a statement that the worth of education must now be measured against the standards of decency and human survival-the issues now looming so large before us in the twenty-first century. It is not education, but education of a certain kind, that will save us.

With Earth in Mind

Opening to and reawakening excluded realms of sensitivity and perception and, going beyond to discover new empathic languages, new ways of interpreting and relating to the living universe becomes our challenge. This opening begins with mindfulness, living in a state that is Always Awakening from our self-induced enchantment, and upon that direct lived experience, to use creative imagination in the service of our true identity, which is life, rather than living as slaves to abstracted ideas and machines. With this state of Always Awakening our authentic nature drives the bus, not the other way around.

Michael

