

Lost and Found

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When I suggest to my students at Penn State that they are *separate* from life—from the planet that sustains them, they beg to differ. After all, they explain, “We have entered this world on the ‘information highway’; with just a few keystrokes we can be ‘connected’ to everyone and everything!”

I, too, know the pleasure of surfing the net—information at my fingertips. Yet, for me these virtual journeys lack genuine intimacy. I float in cyberspace. Absent the immediate sensations of sight and sound and touch and taste and smell, I am orphaned, anchorless, lost.

I, like many today, have spent much of my life living in boxes. Think about it. You wake up in a box (bedroom), you hustle off to work in a box (car); you spend all day in indoors in one box or another—office, store, classroom, mall, and so on. Indeed, it is possible to pass our entire day without making direct contact with unfiltered sunlight, clean air, free-running water, soil, wild plants and animals. That’s what I call being lost.

Living our lives in “boxes” often means that we don’t know the geography of our home places. How about you? There is a simple test that Brian Swimme offers in his book, The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos to help you gauge your knowledge of the geography of home. As Swimme observes:

It’s easy to do. You simply invite someone to visit you who lives at least twenty miles away and who has never visited you before. You can give verbal instructions on how to get to your abode over the telephone, but the one rule is this: In your directions you may refer to anything but human artifice. You may refer to hills, oak trees, the constellations of the night sky, the lakes or ocean shores or caves, the positions of the planets or any ponds, trails, or prairies, the Sun and Moon, cliffs, plateaus, waterfalls, hillocks, estuaries, bluffs, woodlands, inlets, forests, creeks, swamps, bayous, groves, and so on. Whenever your friend gets stuck, she is free to phone you for more directions, but the rule for her is that she must describe her location without referring to any human artifice.

This test asks a very basic question: “Do you know where you are?” The great majority of us, myself included, would probably *not* BE able to pass this test. Yet, I think it is safe to say that the native peoples who dwelled in here prior to the European Conquest would have had little difficulty with it.

Lacking the faintest notion of where we live, we are, in a very real sense, homeless—divorced from the natural world. So it is that most of us have no idea about the origins (the geography) of the water, food, energy and clothing that we depend on for our very survival; nor,

it seems, do we have much knowledge or even interest regarding what happens to these things after we are finished with them. To gauge awareness in this realm, here is a second test:

- Where does your water—this most basic of substances that you use by the tens of gallons each day—come from?
- Where does the water that washes down your drain and toilet bowl go?
- What about the origins of the “solids” entering your dwelling—especially food and clothing? Do you know where these things come?
- And, now, what about the solid waste that leaves your dwelling? What happens to it after it is picked up at curbside?
- Finally, what type of energy (e.g., solar, coal, nuclear, etc.) do you use to electrify, heat and cool your dwelling and where does this energy come from?

Tragically, most of us have been led to believe that water simply comes from the tap, food comes from the supermarket, energy from the plug or pump and waste simply goes “away” (out of sight/out of mind). In a word, we are “lost.”

When you get right down to it, I believe that what we have lost—what is most at stake—is our very ALIVENESS. Indeed, might it be the person who lives via virtual connections is *not* fully alive, the person who knows *not* his home is not full alive, the person who lacks a visceral connection to wind, sunlight, water, animal, vegetable is not fully alive, the person who knows not his relatedness to all that lives is not fully alive?

And considering all of this, might it be that the first step in finding ourselves is to awaken to the fact that we are mostly asleep?