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DOUGALD HINE

## Coming to Our (Animal) Senses

a conversation with David Abram

In the opening pages of *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram stands in the night outside his hut in Bali, the stars spread across the sky, mirrored from below in the water of the rice paddies, and countless fireflies dancing in between. This disorientating abundance of wonder is close to what many of his readers have felt on encountering Abram's words and his way of making sense of the world.

Philosopher, ecologist and sleight-of-hand magician: even the barest outline of his work already suggests the webs he spins between worlds, the unexpected patterns of connection that make his books unique. As a college student in the 1970s, he took a year out to travel across Europe as a street magician, ending up in London where he hung out with the radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing, exploring how the magician's craft of playing with the attention might help open connections with people whose levels of distress placed them beyond the reach of clinical practitioners. Later, he travelled to Nepal and Southeast Asia, to study the healing role of traditional magicians; once again, his own craft opened possibilities for conversation where the professional anthropologist would not have been welcome.

From those encounters, he found himself drawn beyond the relationship of magic and medicine into larger questions about the ongoing negotiation between the human and the more-than-human world. This is the landscape he explores in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, which draws together a re-understanding of animism – rejecting the supernatural projections of missionaries and anthropologists – with a distinctive take on the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. If that sounds heavy going, the book is also woven with passages of extraordinary beauty in which Abram relates his own encounters with the wider-than-human world in all its strangeness. And at the heart of it is the deep question of how we became so distanced from our

surroundings, so unaware of ourselves as animals in a living world, as to become capable of rationalising the destruction which surrounds us?

Thirteen years passed between the publication of Abram's first book and the arrival of *Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology* (2010). The length of time perhaps reflects the priority he gives to the spoken and the embodied, his refusal to accept the dominance of the written word. (As Anthony McCann, who first introduced me to *The Spell of the Sensuous*, muses, 'Chances are, most of the helpful things that have been thought and spoken throughout our history were never written down, and most of the things that have been written down might not be all that helpful.')

When it came, however, the new book was if anything more ambitious.

'A central question was: what if we were to really honour and acknowledge the fact that we are animals?' he explains. 'How would we think, or speak, about even the most ordinary, taken-for-granted aspect of the world, like shadows, or gravity, or houses, or the weather? So much of the language we've inherited is laden with otherworldly assumptions. So many of our patterns of speech, so many of its phrases, so many of the stories embedded in our ways of speaking, hold us in a very cool and aloof relation to the rest of the animate earth that enfolds us. Can we find ways of speaking that call us back into rapport and reciprocity with the other beings, the other shapes and forms of this world?'

We met in Oxford, a strange place for such a conversation; a city which epitomises the heights and the strange coldnesses of 'civilisation'. But from the moment we spot each other across Radcliffe Square, a pocket of warmth and wildness seems to open up. We spend a couple of hours exploring and eating breakfast, before sitting down at last in the gardens of New College, in sight of the old city wall, to film a conversation that would ramble across our mutual fascinations and our desire to make sense of the situation of the world.

What stays with me is the heightened sense of animality which you come away with after spending time with Abram. Later that afternoon, I stepped off the coach in central London and walked down Oxford Street, aware of myself as an animal among other animals, all of us always already reading each other in deep ways which go back thousands of generations.

- DH: It's funny that we're sitting where we are, because one of the ways I've talked about Uncivilised writing is as writing which comes from or goes beyond the city limits, which negotiates with the world beyond the human Pale. And in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, you go to meet these traditional sorcerers, to learn about their role within the human community, but you notice how often they live outside or on the edge of human settlements. And it's a stance that recurs in the writers and thinkers who have inspired me – Alan Garner talks about the *mearcstapa*, the boundary-walker, and there is a text in which Ivan Illich calls himself a *zaunreiter*, a hedge-straddler, an old German word for witch.
- DA: Ah yes, the *hagazussa* (from whence we get our word 'hag'), which means: she who rides the hedge. The magicians are those who ride the boundary between the human world and the more-than-human world of hawks and spiders and cedar trees, those who tend the boundary between the human community and the wider community in which we're embedded. It seems to me that the human hubbub is always nested within a more-than-human crowd of elementals, a community composed first of the particular geological structures and rocks of our locale. The stones and minerals of each place give rise to certain qualities in the soil, and that soil invites a specific array of plants to seed themselves and take root there. Those shrubs and trees, in turn, provoke particular animals to linger and sometimes settle in that terrain, or at least to feast on their leaves and fruits as they migrate through that landscape. Those animals, plants, and landforms are our real neighbours, the folks with whom we need to be *practicing real* community, if we want to be living well in any place.
- DH: One of the things I get from your writing is the sense of the abundance of the natural world. It strikes me that a lot of environmentalism has the opposite quality, that we often describe the world in terms of scarcity. The crises we face are expressed in terms of limits, shortages and scarceness of resources. So how do we make sense of the relationship between the hard walls against which our civilisation is hitting up, and the quality of endlessness in the world as you invite us to experience it?
- DA: It's a puzzle for me, as well. The term 'resource' always befuddles me. If we would simply drop the prefix, "re," whenever we use the term, it would become apparent that we're almost always talking about 'sources', like springs bubbling up from the unseen depths. But when we put that little prefix in front of the word, and speak of things as 'resources', we transform the enigmatic presence of things into a reserve, a stock of

materials simply waiting for us to use. When we conceive it as a stock of stuff, then there naturally comes a sense that that stock is limited, and bound to run out.

If I sense the things of this earth not as a resources but as sources, if I feel them as wellsprings bubbling out of the unknown depths, well, this is not to deny that many of those springs seem to be drying up. This is a horrific circumstance that we've gotten ourselves into. But the way beyond this mess has to involve, first, a reconceiving and a re-seeing and sensing of this wild-flowering world as something that cannot ever be fully objectified, a zone of unfoldings that can never be understood within a purely quantitative or measurable frame. This ambiguous biosphere, in its palpable actuality, is not so much a set of quantifiable objects and determinate processes as it is a dynamic tangle of corporeal agencies, of bodies – or beings – that have their own lives independent of ours. To feel this breathing biosphere as something other than an object is to begin to sense that there's something inexhaustibly strange about this world, something uncanny and unfathomable even and especially in its everyday humdrum ordinariness. The way any weed or clump of dirt seems to exceed all of our measurements and our certainties. And it's this resplendence of enigma and otherness, this uncanniness, that we eclipse whenever we speak solely in terms of scarcity and shortage.

DH: When you talk about how this world can never be adequately reduced to the quantitative and the measurable, it strikes me that there is a difficulty for environmentalism since it has become focused on climate change. Because Carbon Dioxide is so inaccessible to our senses, something we can only measure and not experience. So we are trying to train ourselves to a consciousness of something utterly outside of our direct experience.

DA: You point to a genuine problem in the broad environmental movement, one which mimics a tremendous problem within contemporary civilisation: our culture places a primary value on abstractions, on dimensions of the real of which we have no direct visceral or sensorial experience. We are born into a civilisation that straightaway tells us that the world we experience with our unaided senses is not really to be trusted, that the senses are deceptive ...

DH: That *real* reality is this mathematical layer, which you can get at, if you use the right tools to probe beneath the experience of reality.

DA: If we probe beneath the "illusory" appearances. Exactly. So this world that we directly encounter, through its smells and textures and colours,

comes to seem an illusory – or at best a secondary – realm, derivative from these more primary dimensions. Like the fascinating but largely abstract dimension of axons and dendrites and neurotransmitters washing across neuronal synapses – all of these hidden occurrences unfolding behind our brows – which many of our colleagues believe is what's *really* going on when we imagine we're experiencing the world: the apparent world that we experience is actually born of processes unfolding within the brain. Meanwhile, other colleagues will insist that what's *really* causing our ways of feeling and tasting and touching are molecular patterns and processes tucked inside the nuclei of our cells; that is to say, our experience is primarily caused and coded for by the nucleotide sequences in our genome, by the way certain strands of DNA are transcribed and translated into the proteins that compose us and catalyse all our behaviours.

Still other comrades of ours, working in laboratories very different from those of the molecular biologists and the neurologists, will insist that what's *really* true about the world is what's happening in the subatomic dimension of mesons and gluons and quarks.

So the world of our direct experience seems always to be explained by these other, ostensibly truer and realer dimensions which are nonetheless hidden behind the scenes, and so our felt encounter with one another and with the ground underfoot, and with the wind gusting past our face, is always marginalised ...

DH: ... and mistrusted.

DA: ... and one can sense, perhaps, that this is the very origin, the secret source of the ecological mayhem and misfortune that has befallen our world. Because it's so hard, even today, to mobilise people to act on behalf of the last dwindling wild river, or the last swath of a great forest that is about to be clear-cut, since people no longer feel any deep affinity with the sensuous, palpable earth. Their allegiance is elsewhere, their fascination is held by these other dimensions, which seem more trustworthy and true than this very ambiguous, difficult, and calamity-prone earth that they share with the other species.

And although many of the experts who speak in this manner – relegating the sensuous world to a kind of secondary or derivative status – are avowed atheists, and although they will rail passionately against the creationists and any others who they think are caught up in a superstitious worldview, this approach that privileges abstract dimensions, whether subatomic or genetic, over the ambiguous world of our direct experience

has much in common with old theological notions. It's deeply kindred to the old assumption that the sensuous, earthly world is a sinful, problematic, and derivative realm, fallen away from its truer source – from a heaven hidden beyond all bodily ken, to which the human spirit must aspire.

DH: This reminds me of a conversation that I got into on Twitter last week. Somebody posted: 'All children are born anarchists and atheists.' I sent it on and I said, 'I think they're born anarchists and *animists*.'

DA: Well, there's a lot of evidence that what we call 'animism' – which simply names the intuition that everything is animate, that each thing has its own active agency – that this is a kind of spontaneous experience for the human organism ...

DH: A sort of default state of consciousness?

DA: A default, baseline state for the human creature. It doesn't really seem to be a belief system, but rather a way of speaking in accordance with our spontaneous, animal experience. Since, for all their differences, the various entities I meet – brambles, stormclouds, squirrels, rivers – all seem to be composed of basically the same stuff as myself, well, since I am an experiencing, sensitive creature, so this maple tree must also have its own sensitivities and sensibilities. Doubtless very different from mine (and different even from those of a birch or an oak) but nonetheless this tree seems to have its own agency, its own ability to affect the space around it and the other creatures nearby. And to affect me.

Given the ubiquitous nature of this animistic intuition among the diverse indigenous peoples of this planet – given its commonality among so many exceedingly diverse and divergent cultures – it would seem that this is our birthright as humans. To feel that we are alive within a palpable cosmos that is itself alive through and through. From an indigenous perspective (and even, I would say, from the creaturely perspective of our sensate bodies) there's no getting underneath the felt sense of the world's multiplicitous dynamism to some basically inanimate, inert stratum of matter; rather, to the human animal, matter itself seems to be animate – or self-organising – from the get-go. Such is the most commonplace human experience: in the absence of intervening technologies, we feel ourselves inhabiting a terrain that is shot through with sensitivity and sentience (albeit a sentience curiously different, in many ways, from our own).

DH: And yet to articulate that is immediately to be told that you're project-

ing: that this is Romantic, sentimental, anthropomorphic nonsense!

- DA: The assumption and the knee-jerk objection that comes toward us, over and over again, is that such a participatory way of speaking involves merely a projection of human consciousness onto otherwise inanimate, insentient materials or beings. This reaction often seems (at least to me) a kind of wilful blindness and deafness to anything that does not speak in words; a resolute refusal to hear these other voices as anything other than meaningless sounds. Humans alone have meaningful speech; the sounds of birds and humpback whales and crickets (to say nothing of the whoosh of the wind in the willows, or even the night-time hiss of tires rolling along the rain-drenched pavement) cannot possibly carry their own meanings! There is no openness to the likelihood that these other sounds are genuinely expressive, and communicative, although they carry meanings that we humans cannot necessarily interpret or translate. Certainly we cannot know, in any clear way, what these other utterances – of redwing blackbirds, for instance, or of an elk bugling on an autumn evening – are saying. But nonetheless, if we listen with our own animal ears, uncluttered with assumptions, then these other voices do move us as they reverberate through our flesh. And if we listen year after year, watching closely the patterned movements of elk, perhaps apprenticing ourselves to the ways of the herd as it migrates with the seasons, then one day we may find ourselves spontaneously hearing, like an audible glimpse, some new edge of the meaning embodied in that bugling call.
- DH: One of the things I become more aware of over time as a speaker is the extent to which language acts as a frequency on which something else is being transmitted. The experience of the audience, or of the other people with whom we're interacting, is as much an experience of something else that passes through words, in the way that music passes through a string on a cello or on a guitar, as it is of the rational, the formal content of language.
- DA: Yes, even in this conversation, it's as if the denotative meaning of our words rides on the surface of a much richer, improvisational interchange unfolding between our two animal bodies. There is a rhythm and a tonality and a melody to our speaking, like two birds gradually tuning to one another; via the soundspell of our phrases, and the rise and fall of our singing, our voices affect and inform one another. I suspect that much of the real meaning that arises in any genuine, human dialogue originates in this inchoate layer, far below the dictionary meanings of our words, where

our bodies are simply singing with one another.

But also, I was thinking of our brothers and sisters who insist that human consciousness is so profoundly different from anything else we encounter in the surrounding landscape, and that our sense of the life that we meet in a lightning-struck tree or in a lichen-encrusted rock or even a rusting, overgrown bulldozer is entirely just a projection – their insistence that the world be seen from outside, as it were, by a human consciousness that isn't really continuous with the world ...

DH: That echoes the role of God, in a monotheistic cosmology ...

DA: It does, yes, it's a kind of bodiless view from outside the world, one which flattens all of this diverse, multiplicitous otherness into just one kind of presence, the so-called material world, a mass of basically inert or mechanically-determined stuff. But as soon as we allow that things have their own agency, their own interior animation – their own pulse, so to speak – it becomes possible to notice how oddly *different* these various beings are from one another and from ourselves. If I insist that rocks have no life or agency whatsoever, then I can't easily notice or account for the way that a slab of granite affects me very differently than does a sandstone boulder, or the manner in which each influences the space around it in a distinct way. But as soon as I allow that that rock is not entirely inert, then I can begin to feel into the very different style and activity of that sandstone relative to the granite's way of being, or to that of a piece of marble. So this is really a way of beginning to access the irreducible plurality of styles, or velocities, or rhythms of being, of waking up to the manifold otherness that surrounds us, rather than reducing all this multiplicity to one flattened-out thing, 'the environment'.

I can't really feel into, or enter into relationship with, an inert object. I cannot suss out the changing mood of a winter sky if I deny that the sky *has* moods.

DH: It feels like what we're talking about are 'ways of seeing', to use John Berger's phrase – or ways of sensing, since it's not only about the visual. That takes me to something I was thinking about before. It's a painting from 1649 of a man called William Petty, who was Professor of Anatomy here in Oxford, at the ripe age of twenty eight. I've been fascinated by this painting since I stumbled across it in the National Portrait Gallery, years ago. In the painting, he's holding a skull in one hand, and in his other hand is an anatomy textbook open at the drawing of the skull, and from where the hands are it's as if you are watching the scales of the



seventeenth-century tipping away from the symbolic and the physical, real skull, towards the new reality – quantitative, measured, anatomised, cut open to reveal its mathematical properties.

DA: Wow.

DH: And what's remarkable is that Petty the anatomist stands between two other phases of Petty's life. Before that, during the Civil War, he had been in Paris with Thomas Hobbes, studying optics. And this is the moment in which, as Illich discusses, you are passing from an earlier optics, in which the gaze is understood as something tactile, a reaching out towards what you are looking at, to a new, lens-based, passive-receptive understanding, which sees our eyes as cameras in our heads.<sup>2</sup> So that's where Petty was before he was here in Oxford, and afterwards, in the 1650s, he went with Cromwell to Ireland, where he carried out the first econometric survey of a country, after the bloody subjugation of Ireland by Cromwell's forces. And so you have, in this one figure, the conjunction of the transition to a new way of seeing; the anatomical cutting open of reality to reveal the mathematical new reality, hidden behind the untrustworthy evidence of our senses; and the foundation of modern economics, which is bounded in the same assumption that the measurable is the real and that the fundamental character of reality is scarcity.

DA: It's amazing to think of that one painting as presenting an image of the hinge between these realities.

DH: Yes. And I suppose where this takes us is back to how on earth we relate these things to the sense of urgency which characterises environmentalism, and the consciousness of the crises we're facing. Because what I hear people saying is, 'Come on, we've got five years to save the planet. It's hard enough getting people to change their bloody light bulbs, and you want to up-end 350 years of people's worldviews? This is self-indulgence!' So what do we say back?

DA: It's a tough one, because it's trying to speak across such different bodily stances, such different ways of standing in the face of this outrageous event breaking upon us, rolling like a huge wave over the earth. But the idea that we can master this breaking wave, and control it, and figure out how we're going to engineer a way out of this cataclysm, is an extension of the same thinking that has brought us into it.

DH: It presents us with a choice: either we can get control of this reeling system, or we have to give in to despair. To me, what I've been looking for – and what *Dark Mountain* is rooted in – is the search for hope without

control. And I know, at the level of my human experience, that it's only when I let go of control that I can find a deep hope, as opposed to a wishful thinking.

DA: Control or despair, it's a false choice. Total certainty or complete hopelessness – they amount to much the same thing, and they're both useless. But also, the insistence that we've got just five years, or we've got twenty years, or two – these are all framed within the mindset of a linear, progressive time that is itself very different from the kind of timing, or rhythm, that the living land itself inhabits. The other animals seem to align themselves within the roundness of time, a curvature that our bodies remain acquainted with, although our thinking minds have become mightily estranged from this cyclical sense of time's roundness. The round dance of the seasons, the large and small cycles of the sun and the moon. Certainly, there's no way through the onrushing instability of climate change and global weirding without at least beginning to recouple our senses into the larger body of the sensuous, without beginning to tune ourselves and our intelligence back into these larger turnings and rhythms, even as the seasonal cycles, in many places, are beginning to shift.

Sensory perception is like a silken thread that binds our separate nervous systems into the wider ecosystem. Perception, beginning to attend to the shifting nuances around us, taking the time to slow down, rather than speeding up to meet the urgency – slowing down to notice what is actually happening in the local terrain, even if it's a buzzing cityscape that we inhabit, noticing whatever weed is breaking up through the pavement at this spot, or on which skyscraper ledge the peregrines are nesting, or why these apples have so much less taste than they did when I was growing up, and what that says about the soils in which these apples are growing, or how they're grown. I won't notice those tastes if I'm motivated only by a frantic sense of urgency and of time running out.

DH: One of the phrases from the manifesto which I've held onto most is when we say, 'The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world, full stop.' And I'd add to that, that the end of the world as we know it is also the end of a way of knowing the world. Whatever happens, to the extent that we are still going to be here, we're going to live through the end of a lot of the certainties that characterised the ways of knowing the world that have served us for the past few lifetimes. And that's not a utopian goal, that's something that is going to happen whether or not we

manage to do anything about climate change.

DA: That's right, and as these very conventional, long-standing ways of knowing begin to spring leaks – and in many cases the leaks are already turning into floods – this also suggests a replenishment of much older and deeper and more primordial sensibilities that we've cut ourselves off from for many centuries, and in some cases for several millennia.

But how do you approach the shuddering aspect of this turning point that also entails that there will be many, many losses? Not just losses of facile pleasures that we've come to take for granted, but the disappearance or dissolution of whole ecosystems, and the dwindling and vanishing of myriad other species from the lifeworld, other creatures with whom we've sustained a kind of conviviality, throughout the long stretch of our human tenure within this biosphere. We find ourselves living, today, in a world of increasing wounds. In the course of my speaking, hither and yon, I encounter many people who are frightened of their direct, animal experience, who are terrified at the mere thought of trusting their senses, and of stepping into a more full-bodied way of knowing and feeling, because they intuit that a more embodied and sensorial form of awareness would entail waking up to so many grievous losses. People sense that grief and they immediately retreat, they pull back and say 'no, I want to stay more in the abstract.' Or they want to retreat into relation with their smartphone or their iPad, taking refuge in the new technologies with their virtual pleasures. Because they quite rightly sense that there is some grief lurking on the other side of such a corporeal awakening.

What they don't realise is that the grief is just a threshold, a necessary threshold through which each of us needs to step. The first moment of coming to our senses is indeed one of grief. Yet it's as though the parched soil underfoot needs the water of our tears for new life to begin to grow again.

DH: Well, the soil of ourselves needs us to go through that. But one goes through it, into being alive and being present.

DA: It's as if the grief is a gate, and our tears a kind of key, opening a place of wonder that's been locked away. If we step through that gate we find ourselves slowly but with new pleasure being drawn into first one and then another and then a whole host of divergent relationships, each of which nourishes and feeds different aspects of our organism. We abruptly find ourselves in active relation and reciprocity with dragonflies and hooting owls, and with the air flooding in at your nostrils, with streetlamps

buzzing as they break down, and with gravity, and beetles. There's a kind of eros that begins to spark up between your body and the other bodies or beings around you.

DH: I think it's about a different relationship to time. Part of the numbness of the way of being in the world which has been orthodox in recent times is the enslavement of the present to the future, which to me is the core of the myth of Progress. So when people attack Dark Mountain for being gloomy and pessimistic, it bemuses me, because to me believing in Progress is absenting yourself from the joy of being alive now. And this is connected to the denial of death that is characteristic of modern culture. Part of the reason we have so much difficulty facing the ecological grief that is part of what it means to be alive right now is because we are terrified of our own deaths. And so much of the activity of our societies is a way of staying busy enough not to pass through the full entry into consciousness of the fact that you are going to die, and that this does not cancel out what makes being alive good.

DA: I think you're right. This great fear and avoidance of our mortality. Not just of our death, however, because there's also a tremendous terror of vulnerability; a real fear of being vulnerable in the present moment. If I'm fully here, where my fingers and my nose and my ears are residing, then I am subject to a world that is much bigger than me, exposed to other beings in it like yourself who can see me and perhaps disdain me. If I acknowledge and affirm my own animal embodiment, then I am vulnerable to the scorn of others, and to all the sorts of breakdowns and diseases and decay to which the body is susceptible. There are so many reasons to take flight from being really bodily here, deeply a part of the same world that we share with the other animals and the plants and the stones. So yes, a fear of being bodily present within a world that's so much bigger than us, a world that has other beings in it that that can eat us, and ultimately *will* eat us. The palpable world, this blooming, buzzing, wild proliferation of shapes and forms that feed upon one another, yes, and yet also jive and dance with one another – this earthly cosmos that our work is trying to coax people into noticing – is not a particularly nice world. It's not a sweet world. It's shot through with shadows and predation and risk – it's fucking dangerous, this place – but it's mighty beautiful, it's shudderingly beautiful precisely *because* it's so shadowed and riven with difficulty.

DH: It's not easy, but it's worth it. Easiness and happiness and convenience are

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things we seem to have fallen into the habit of believing are worth pursuing. And yet, if we think about our most meaningful relationships, the people we love most closely, even the best of our relationships are not characterised by easiness and they're not characterised by everything being happy ever after. Most of the relationships we will have in our lives are easier than the relationships that will mean most to us.

### Notes

1. A spoken remark.
2. Ivan Illich, 'The Scopic Past and the Ethics of the Gaze: A plea for the historical study of ocular perception' (1998) [http://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1998\\_scopic\\_past.PDF](http://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1998_scopic_past.PDF)