

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Toward Panpsychic Experience: A sentient world on our pulses

Peter Reason, PhD

*Peter Reason was Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, England, and an international leader in the development of participative approaches to inquiry. He co-edited the **Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice** (2006, 2008) and co-founded the journal **Action Research**. Since retiring from full time academic work, Peter's two books **Spindrift: A wilderness pilgrimage at sea** (2014) and **In Search of Grace: An ecological pilgrimage** (2017) weave explorations of the human place in the ecology of the planet into the stories of sailing voyages. His most recent publications (with artist Sarah Gillespie) are **On Presence** (2019) and **On Sentience** (2021); and (with Jacqueline Kurio), "**Voicing Rivers through Ontopoetics: A Co-operative Inquiry**." *River Research and Applications, Special Issue: 'Voicing Rivers'* (2022).*

I am seventy-seven years old. I have studied with many teachers and worked in many disciplines, including humanist and transpersonal psychology, Ch'an Buddhism, Tai Chi, Medicine Wheel, Gaia practice. I was happy to respond to the invitation for this collection, but as I approach this writing, I find myself wondering: is it appropriate to describe such experiences, out of context, in a public domain? As I reflect, I find that the very idea of a 'spiritual awakening' disturbs me. The word 'spiritual' points tacitly toward a transcendence of this worldly realm; for me that which is sacred is immanent on Earth. And the metaphor of 'awakening' harks back to the conceit of Enlightenment: my experience is that the dark is as full of meaning as the light. Further, my experience is not of one turning point but an unfolding process over decades. I can, however, trace some moments of grace, of subject-to-subject encounters, that lead me tentatively to experience the world as sentient.

I was brought up firmly within a modernist, masculine, rational worldview.

The non-living world was composed of insentient things; the living world was there for human use; any other view was for the fairies. Over approaching eighty years, my perspective has changed radically. At times, I am quite alarmed at myself.

Maybe my first major step away from this was my engagement in the human potential movements in the 1970s. In encounter groups and co-counselling, I began to confront the rigidities in my character and beliefs and the impossibility of purely rational understanding.

A significant insight came when I was searching for a design for my PhD research. I can vividly remember the moment, the footfall on that particular paving stone, when I realized that in order to study two-person relations in authentic depth, I needed to invite people to the inquiry not as ‘research subjects’ (i.e., the objects of my research) but as co-inquirers. In doing this I undercut the separation of researcher from the object of inquiry that underpins the Cartesian worldview and thus much science. This set me off on a quest for a ‘participatory paradigm’ and to articulate the theory and practice of participatory action research.

When I look back at this time, I see my understanding was intellectual and anthropocentric. I talked and wrote about participation rather than feeling it ‘upon the pulses’ as poet John Keats put it. Over the decades, through influential encounters with teachers and several confounding experiences, I moved toward a deeper sense of living as a participant in a sentient world, ‘a world of persons, only some of whom are human’, to borrow animist Graham Harvey’s phrase.

These experiences include:

A night on a hilltop in Wales, when, as part of my Medicine Wheel Apprenticeship, I was charged to summon a shooting star to confirm my ‘sacred name’. When a vivid and indisputably real star streaked across the sky, my preconceptions of a world of insentient objects was shaken to the core, and with it my sense of my own identity: how could such a thing happen to a rational white male like me?

Two long ecological pilgrimages sailing a small yacht alone in the waters around the British Isles brought profound encounters. In particular, when becalmed on moonless nights, I looked beyond the bright stars into the smoky haze of starlight that filled the sky, faint but dense, profoundly dark and brightly lit at the same time. And with the gazing I was drawn into the infinity of the space above me, so that I felt I was both disappearing into and becoming part of the

whole of everything.

On the same pilgrimages I sailed on the west coast of Scotland, for days on end doing little but watch the transit of moon and sun across the heavens, absorbed in the generative silence that underpins our everyday world. As I travelled north, I anchored alongside ancient rocks: first the 500-million-year-old granite on Mull, then the more than two-billion-year-old Torridonean sandstone, finally reaching the over three-billion-year-old Hebridean gneiss. Through this, I found myself experiencing the reality of Deep Time.

My current practice is to initiate and participate in co-operative inquiries with humans and Rivers. These inquiries draw on Freya Mathews' 'living cosmos panpsychism': if we invoke a world of sentient presence, calling to other-than-human beings as open to our communicative gesture, might we receive a response? We find that our invocations may on occasion elicit 'moments of grace', responses that strongly suggest a subjective presence. Such responses are poetic, not in human language but in synchronous material gestures. These may be subtle—the breath of wind or the falling of leaves; or dramatic events whose unexpected timeliness confirms their veracity.

I visit the River I am working with at dawn. I prostrate myself in a ceremony of atonement, expressing grief and sorrow for the damage modern humans inflict on the world. As I complete this, the Sky flames into colour and, quite unexpected, I hear the rhythmic thrum of wings. Looking up, I see two Swans flying across the orange morning clouds. Necks outstretched, wings beating, they fly east across River. I imagine they will fly away, but they circle round and fly back right overhead. The timing and choreography of their flight is a strong indication that this is a gesture from the other-than-human in response to my call. I am left sitting with my mouth open. A moment of grace.

I remain ambivalent about placing these narratives in a collection such as this. I worry about exhibiting what Chögyam Trungpa called 'spiritual materialism'. For years I refrained from speaking about my encounter with the shooting star, seeing the experience as private, between me and the Cosmos; but gradually I came to see that as a 'teaching story' it might stimulate wider imaginations.

We are asked also to say how our 'spiritual awakening' has contributed to our career and our relationships with others. This is, once again, no easy task. As I look back, I see that my life has been overshadowed by the gathering ecological catastrophe. I have a childhood memory, strangely both clear and

hazy, that was an intimation of things to come. As a small boy in the 1950s I am sitting at the kitchen table turning the pages of a weekly magazine—possibly *Life* or *Picture Post*. I come to a double page spread featuring a dramatic black and white photo of a filthy smokestack, illustrating an article predicting a future environmental crisis. I ask my mother about it, and her reply lovingly brushes my concerns aside, forbidding even the thought that lies behind the question: “You don’t want to think about that, dear”. But clearly the notion that life on Earth was precarious lodged in my mind.

We now know that we live in what some call the Anthropocene; others, maybe more accurately, call it the Capitalocene. Whatever we call it, this is the epoch in which the activities of humans—actually a small minority—dominate, destroy, and overwhelm, the processes of the planet both locally and globally. It is also the Sixth Extinction, in which the loss of life forms is up to 1,000 times the background rate. It is clear that those of us in that small minority have a practical and moral obligation to lower our impact on the Earth system, individually and collectively. In particular, we have the now critical task of stopping the emission of anthropogenic greenhouse gases into the atmosphere.

In addition to this, we must understand this devastating impact is driven by a worldview, developed again within that minority culture, that sees the other-than-human world as purely material. This worldview channels our thinking and perception in significant ways. It tells us that that the world is made of separate things. These objects of nature are composed of inert matter operating according to causal laws. They have no subjectivity, consciousness or intelligence, no intrinsic purpose, value and meaning. And it tells us that mind and physical reality are separate. Humans, and humans alone, have the capacity for rational thought and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. And until very recently, this view was applied equally by this small minority to the greater part of humanity.

My life’s work has been to contribute to an alternative: to deepen my understanding of what I have called a ‘participatory worldview’ both intellectually and ‘upon the pulses’; and to smuggle these insights into everything I do, to temper everyday life with a participatory perspective. This included my work at the University of Bath teaching ‘sustainable business’ to students; developing the theory and practice of participatory action research; contributing to a range of ‘alternative’ institutions. Post retirement, liberated from the obligation to make scholarly contributions to the University research profile and materially

supported by a generous pension, I hope my work has taken a more radical turn. Over the last few years, I have invoked the presence of Rivers sentient beings, drawing other humans into a series of co-operative inquiries: if we invoke a world of sentient presence, calling to other-than-human beings as persons, might we elicit a response? The extent to which these endeavours make any significant contribution to the catastrophe of our times is unknowable. But the work feels worthwhile.

The point is, very simply, we are already part of it all. We don't have to work at it: we belong in the Cosmos, always in relation to each other and the more-than-human world, glorious and flawed yet temporary centres of awareness and action within an interconnected sentient whole. And since we are part of it all then the moral and practical issue for all humans is to learn to live in a way that does justice to this participation.