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Voicing Rivers through ontopoetics: A co-operative inquiry

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Abstract

A co-operative inquiry was established to explore the experience of a panpsychic world of sentient beings rather than inert objects, a world in which mind—sentience, subjectivity, and the will of self-realization—is a fundamental aspect of matter, just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind. The nature of worldviews, the fundamental basis of our perceiving, thinking, valuing, and acting, is addressed and a brief outline of living cosmos panpsychism offered. The inquiry asks, could we humans, through intentional engagement, relate to the rivers as beings, subjects, or other-than-human persons in their own right? How might we engage with the rivers through personal relationship, ceremony, and invocation? What are the possibilities for reciprocal communication? In short, how might rivers speak?

KEYWORDS
co-operative inquiry, experiential inquiry, living cosmos panpsychism, ontopoetics, Panpsychism, worldviews

After 2 weeks away, Andrea spends an afternoon visiting her local river, the Little Campbell—or as she has learned to call her, Tah-la-lu—in British Columbia, Canada. She sings to River as she walks, noticing how time seems to have slowed and, despite her excitement, slows her own pace to match. River lies beyond the train tracks; crossing them now, she feels far from daily life, as if the tracks represent passage into a different world, a liminal place both here and not here. Picking her way along the fence edging the beach and the rising tide, she turns a corner and, on seeing Tah-la-lu, feels a surge of joy.

At that moment, and without warning, a flock of geese fly in from behind her, landing with honks and splashes on the calm surface of the river. Startled at first by this unexpected and noisy arrival, she begins to laugh with delight. This sudden appearance feels heraldic, ceremonial. Andrea feels both included in the noisy action of the geese and honoured by it. She is overcome by a powerful sense of being both loved and in love—she is safe, welcomed and above all, feels accepted in all the ways one is by a very dear, old friend.

Andrea's gift to Tah-la-lu is some seawater collected from the Dead Sea the previous summer. She sits by the water's edge for a while, deep in the thoughts and feelings being stirred by River. When she feels it is time, she slowly pours the seawater from a small glass bottle into River. She watches while the cloud of salt drifts slowly towards the riverbed, holding its integrity as a flock of spiralling birds or fish might, letting her mind drift in the reflective space offered by the water.

Suddenly, the geese break into her thoughts with bright, spanking honks as they lift noisily from River. They rise and circle her once, before flying slowly back across the ocean from whence they had come. The signal to leave has been struck; Andrea recognises that her time with River today has been brought to an end. She will be back though, she is certain; she has fallen in love.[1]

What would it be like to live in a world of sentient beings rather than inert objects—in a communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects, to borrow cultural and Earth historian Berry's (1988) felicitous phrasing? How would we relate to such a world? And if we invoke such a world of sentient presence, calling to other-than-human beings as persons, might we elicit a response?

For some, these will be strange, even alarming questions, likely never raised within the prevailing Western scientific view of a material world. Such questions direct our attention to our worldview or paradigm, the fundamental basis of our perceiving, thinking, valuing, and acting: "The sort of ideas we attend to, and the sort of ideas which we push into the negligible background, govern our hopes, our fears, our control of behaviour. As we think, we live" (Whitehead, 1968, p. 63). Our worldview is not a rational structure; it reflects the mood of the times, the metaphors we use, and our models of the world; it

encompasses our total sense of who we are, what the world is, and how we know it; it directs our sense of what is worthwhile and important and what moral goods to pursue; it guides our sense of the aesthetic and the spiritual; and it is the basis of our social organization and political, personal, professional, and craft practices.

The contemporary Western worldview has its roots in the enlightenment. At that time, Galileo told us that nature was open to our gaze if we understood that it was written in the language of mathematics. Descartes' cogito ergo sum made a radical separation between the human and other modes of being, and Newton formulated an extraordinarily powerful view essentially of the universe as a determinate machine obeying causal laws (see e.g., Skolimowski, 1994).

The materialist worldview that was established channels our thinking and perception in significant ways. It tells us 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 and 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 thinking and action and for understanding and giving meaning to the world. Max Weber described this split between humanity and nature, and the abrogation of all mind to humans, as the "disenchantment of the world" (M. Weber, 1930). Our aim in this paper is to counter this split and contribute to a healing and a "re-enchantment."

As philosopher Freya Mathews—whose articulation of "living cosmos panpsychism" we draw on in this paper—points out, "the presuppositions and beliefs we bring to our encounter with the world act as a kind of *invocation*—they call up reality under a particular aspect or aspects, so that this is the aspect that reality will reveal to us in the course of the encounter" (Mathews, 2009, p. 3). In similar vein, Richard Tarnas, asks us to consider the cosmos as a being of creative intelligence, posits: would we be more likely to reveal ourselves to those who treat us as a lifeless object, plundering our secrets, or to those who treat us respectfully as a living presence? (Tarnas, 2006, p. 39).

The focus of this paper is the account of the experiences arising from a small co-operative inquiry group exploring the practice of living cosmos panpsychism. It is not our purpose here to set out this perspective in detail; we provide a brief account as a framing for the co-operative inquiry. Nor is it our purpose to consider the wide-ranging debates concerning panpsychism in contemporary academic philosophy. We would briefly note that much of this debate is addressed to consciousness studies and the philosophy of mind (for an accessible account see Goff, 2019), while living cosmos panpsychism offers a broader, ecological concern. For more on living cosmos panpsychism, see Mathews' writing (Mathews, 2003, 2009, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c).

In a panpsychic perspective, mind—sentience, subjectivity, and the will to self-realization—is a fundamental aspect of matter, just as matter is a fundamental aspect of mind. Mathews asks us to consider that the cosmos is One, a coherent field of mind-matter, which in its evolution differentiates into Many, self-realizing and self-reflexive beings. Thus all things, including the Earth, are integral to the fabric of the *living cosmos*, all of the same sentient cloth; the empirical world of classical physics is the outward appearance of a field of subjective presence. We humans are part of a world that has depth as well as structure: a communicative order, an order of meaning, unfolds alongside the causal, material order. The Many, as a community of subjects, reach out to each other in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a "poetic ecology": the fundamental erotics of being touched by the world and touching it in return.

Poetics is not only a way of speaking about the world, it is also a communicative engagement *with* the world, a practice Mathews calls "ontopoetics" (Mathews, 2009). For the expression of meaning does not emanate only from the human side: the world is capable of—actively seeks—engagement with us, opening the possibility of a "communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it" (Mathews, 2017a, p. 5). This world is a place of *enchantment*—literally meaning "wrapped in chant or song or incantation" (Mathews, 2003, p. 18)—its subjectivity rendered responsive by human invocation. Through the poetic, we may see or "bring forth" a world that refuses to be reduced to objects but is laden with meaning. Of course, this does not take place in human language: it is necessarily a *poetic* order, conveying meaning in image and metaphor, taking place not in words or concepts, but through material form in a language of *things*. (For more on poetics see Bringhurst, 1993, 2008; Mueller, 2017, pp. 85, 128–9; Steffler, 2019; A. Weber, 2017, p. 86). There are important parallels and meeting points between ontopoetics and the practice of indigenous people worldwide which are beyond the scope of this paper (Country et al., 2016; but see e.g., Country et al., 2015; Harvey, 2017; for an exploration of the contemporary relevance of animism, see A. Weber, 2020).

Modern humans are perceptually alienated from this poetic order: if we conceive the world as a brute object, it will only reveal itself as such. But if we invoke a living presence, then we may receive a meaningful response—if we are open to it. Experiences such as Andrea's with the geese should not be dismissed as romantic projection: they are encounters with other beings in the world.

Just as a tributary joins a stream, the journey of our river group inquiry begins long before our first meeting. In preparation for teaching a course on Panpsychism and Co-operative Inquiry at the California Institute of Integral Studies, retired academic and nature writer Peter, and doctoral candidate Jacqueline, begin a small-scale inquiry investigating the personhood of their local rivers.

Out of the blue, 2 weeks into this project, Peter receives an email from Australian colleague Sandra Wooltorton. On learning of their work, Sandra invites Jacqueline and Peter to contribute to the Voicing Rivers project. They are touched by the synchronicity in this invitation, as if rivers across the globe are asking for attention from the human community. This leads Peter and Jacqueline to invite three others to engage with local rivers over a 6-week period in a more formal co-operative inquiry process. The five members of the river group inquiry are:

> *Andrea, CEO of an NGO working with refugees, a friend of Jaqueline's and past student of Peter's. Andrea's partner rivers were the Little Campbell in British Columbia, known to the Semiahmu First Nation people through*

whose traditional lands it flows as Tah-la-lu; and Kisiskâciwanisîpiy or North Saskatchewan River, which flows through Banff National Park and which traditionally borders Nehinaw (Cree) and Siksika (Blackfoot) territory. While these living watercourses still host a diversity of wildlife and plant species, both rivers are threatened with poor water quality and habitat loss; both are on the national Endangered Rivers list. (Figure 1, *Tah-la-lu*; Figure 2, *Kisiskâciwanisîpiy).*

Dave, retired Professor of Holistic Healthcare, a friend of Peter's and participant in earlier co-operative inquiries. Dave lives by the tidal estuary of the River Fowey in Cornwall, historically an important port for the export of China Clay, but now primarily known as a centre for watersports. The Fowey rises on Bodmin Moor and drops to sea level at the picturesque Golitha Falls. (Figure 3, *Fowey).*

David, retired, a friend of Peter's, has lived and walked by the River Severn in Gloucestershire, England, for several decades. The Severn, in Welsh Afon Hafren, is the longest river in Great Britain, rising in the Cambrian Mountains in mid Wales, and for much of its length marking the boundary with England, draining a large area of both countries and providing important river navigation. Its lower reaches have some of the largest tidal ranges in the world and feature a regular tidal bore. In the third week David goes on vacation to Switzerland and works with the

FIGURE 1 Tah-la-lu, British Columbia, Canada. Photo credit: Andrea Montgomery Di Marco [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 2 Kisiskâciwanisîpiy, British Columbia, Canada. Photo credit: Andrea Montgomery Di Marco [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 3 Fowey, Cornwall, UK. Photo credit: Dave Peters [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

*Plessur, a mountain tributary of the Rhine, for the second half of the inquiry. (*Figure 4, *Severn*; Figure 5, *Plessur).*

*Jacqueline, doctoral student exploring labyrinth practice as a means of aligning with the cosmos. Her partner is the River Glen in Northumberland, England, which rises in the Cheviot Hills and feeds into the River Till, a tributary of the River Tweed. The Glen flows through an area rich in archaeological interest, including Iron Age hill forts, early Celtic Saints, and bloody warfare between Scotland and England. (*Figure 6, *Glen).*

*Peter, writer and retired professor of action research practice, who has been walking the length of the River Avon in pilgrimage. There are five rivers named Avon in England—since Avon is the Celtic word for river. The "Bristol" Avon rises from several sources in South Gloucestershire and initially flows east, before making a great loop to flow west through Bath and Bristol into the Severn at Avonmouth. The Avon originally served the slave and tobacco trade through Bristol Docks and now hosts an important container port at Avonmouth. (*Figure 7, *Avon).*

We came together to explore what it would be like to live in a panpsychic world: could we, through intentional engagement, relate to the rivers as beings, subjects or other-than-human persons in their own right? How might we engage with the rivers through personal relationship, ceremony, and invocation? What were the possibilities for reciprocal communication? In short, how might rivers speak? (For other account of participatory research with other-than-humans see Bastian, Jones, Roe, & Buser, 2016).

Drawing on the principles of co-operative inquiry, we agree upon the following approach at our first zoom meeting:

- We will visit our rivers, exploring how to invoke presence and attending for response at least once a week.
- We will compose some kind of account of our experience (prose/poetry/drawing/photos) and share with the group for feedback and discussion.
- We will meet on Zoom weekly to reflect on the previous week's encounter and decide how we might proceed the following week.
- We commit to engaging in this way for 6 weeks, with a possibility for further engagement in the future.

FIGURE 4 Severn, Gloucestershire, UK. Photo credit: Barbara Manzi-Fe [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 5 Plessur, Graubunden, Switzerland. Photo credit: David Manzi-Fe [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 6 Glen, Northumberland, UK. Photo credit: Jacqueline Kurio [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

FIGURE 7 Avon, Somerset, UK. Photo credit: Peter Reason [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

This account was crafted by the authors drawing on the experiential evidence gathered in the inquiry, in consultation and with full agreement of the human participants.

Co-operative inquiry has two central characteristics that make it profoundly suitable for panpsychic inquiry: it treats those involved—both human and by extension other-than- human persons—as subjective, self-directing beings and therefore as equal participants in the inquiry process, and it emphasizes the experiential ground of knowing.

In traditional research, the roles of the researcher and subject are mutually exclusive: the researcher only contributes the thinking that goes into the project, and the subjects only contribute the action to be studied. In co-operative inquiry, these exclusive roles are replaced by mutual relationships, so that all involved work together as both co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry; everyone gets into the experience and action that is being explored; everyone is involved in making sense and drawing conclusions. Participants work together through cycles of action and reflection, developing their understanding and practice by engaging in an "extended epistemology" of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing. (Heron, 1981, 1996a; Heron & Reason, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2008).

We begin by settling in, looking for places and ways to connect with our Rivers. In the first session we speak of familiarisation, learning about geography and history, raising our awareness of ancestral imprints shaping the landscape that itself shapes us. There is an air of restlessness and wandering. Andrea discovers that the Tah-la-lu flows through First Nations territory and there are issues of trespass to consider; Dave drives spontaneously onto Bodmin Moor finding himself at the source of the Fowey; David begins seeing the Severn with new eyes.

*Our second week is more focused. There are shared appearances of other-than-human companions or guardians: Crow, Heron, Dragonfly, Kingfisher. During this cycle the publication of a report into the pollution of UK rivers (*Environment Agency, 2020*) alerts us to the endangered state of major rivers worldwide.*

By the third week we are becoming aware of a shift, of something coalescing among the group members that is gaining coherence. Peter comments that it is as if the world is saying, "Yes, this is happening!"; we see our experiences both reflecting and responding to each other's. We also see initial evidence that we have opened up and entered into a field of communication between ourselves and the rivers.

As we allow ourselves to become more porous to the world's subjectivity, all members report the development of deeper feelings with our rivers. Through these journeys we are led into seeing how water shapes culture and society, and how we shape these beings in return. We begin to feel the significance of water to life and to our lives in deeper ways and with more nuance than mere intellectual knowing.

Punctuating these shifts in experience and understanding are moments when we find ourselves blessed, as river-beings appear to respond directly to our calls, as the next story with Jacqueline reveals. Such synchronous happenings cut through any remaining scepticism about rivers as living beings.

In the last weeks of our inquiry, the experiences and understandings deepen. As we engage further and reflect on our experiences, we come to realize that the boundary between ourselves and the wider world—what Watts (1978) *called the skin-encapsulated ego—is not only thin; at times it seems to fade completely. We experience ourselves as somehow, albeit subtly, changed.*

Both living cosmos panpsychism and co-operative inquiry place a strong emphasis on practice. Mathews argues that environmental philosophy has significantly failed to alter the self-destructive course of Western civilization because it is "specular or representational in nature." The very act of theorizing the world, however well-intentioned, is alienating; through whatever lens of discourse, we look out at the world and imagine it spread passively for our gaze. Such specular theorizing creates the dualistic impasse it seeks to resolve, leaving us "stranded in a hidden solipsism, a subliminal subject-object impasse" (Mathews, 2017b, p. 146). She writes that from "a panpsychist view, the aim is not to theorize the world, but to relate to it, to rejoice in that relationship" (Mathews, 2003, p. 88). In similar vein, Heron refers to the "primacy of the practical" in co-operative inquiry practice (Heron, 1996b).

The practice of co-operative inquiry thus opens a route toward systematic inquiry into the panpsychic worldview. Co-operative inquiry is an iterative process in which co-researchers engage in cycles of action and reflection through an "extended" epistemology—extended that is from the rational-empirical categories of traditional research. This epistemology embraces experiential knowing through meeting and encounter; presentational knowing through the use of aesthetic, expressive forms; propositional knowing through words and concepts; and practical knowing in the exercise of diverse skills—which may be physical, interpersonal, attentional, and/or political. These forms of knowing are brought to bear upon each other, through the use of inquiry cycles, to enhance their mutual congruence, both within each inquirer and the inquiry group as a whole (Heron & Reason, 2008).

A co-operative inquiry can start anywhere in the extended epistemology—with new experiences that call for investigation, with

new practices that are demanded. Often it starts with questions about practice expressed in propositional form—such as the summary of living cosmos panpsychism we have outlined above. Quality inquiry arises through the systematic—and also serendipitous—cycling through these ways of knowing (Reason, 2006).

Thus our river inquiry, starting from the assumptions of living cosmos panpsychism, engaged in 6 cycles of inquiry: visiting our rivers regularly to explore different approaches to invocation; finding initial presentational form in writing, photography, video, poetry, and drawing; meeting weekly to share experiences and make sense together; and deciding the practical actions we should take in the subsequent cycle.

Jacqueline wakes at 5.30 a.m. to sunshine and motionless trees outside the window; the wind has finally dropped. She has been thinking of River all week, waiting, watching for the right time to visit, balancing family and personal needs and desires. Feeling the time is now, she quickly gets ready and is at the path leading down to the water by 6 a.m.

The bright, fresh, morning air ripples and trills with birdsong and from her place at the head of the path, Jacqueline can see both the sun and a crescent moon in the sky above. A stab of recognition jolts her into noticing how this configuration reflects the feelings she's been having all week about the position she occupies as the fulcrum of the family. She feels the sighting affirms her visit, she feels happy and light, her body slowly filling with a profound joy at being again with the trees, River, and Hill. She requests permission to cross what feels like a threshold to sacred space, and a light breeze springs up in the bushes and trees around. Could it be acceptance? A greeting? She waits for what feels a respectable time before slowly walking down to the water, greeting bush-beings, flowers, and insects as she passes.

River bubbles along happily; her joy matches its tumbling, tinkling sounds. She greets the three large rocks squatting by the water's edge at the end of the path with familiarity, like seeing old friends. Putting down her bag, she takes out two gifts: a small, glass bottle containing water from her last visit to River, and a smooth, round, white stone picked up from a local beach. Holding both stone and bottle, she sings a mantra previously inspired by River, enjoying the sensation of her voice drifting out over the water. She sings quietly, feeling shy at the extension of self through voice into place. Uncorking the bottle, voicing gratitude and love, she pours the water slowly into the flowing water. Finally, she offers the stone, telling the story of where it came from before tossing it high in the air and watching it fall into the water with a splash. It lies bright and white against the dark rocks of the riverbed and she stands and watches it for a while as thoughts of time, death, and impermanence drift like clouds across her mind. She completes the ritual by speaking her intention aloud, informing River she will sit, listen, and open to anything they want to share. Sitting on one of the large rocks, she falls to appreciating the light; the way it dances and plays with the surface of the water, how it moves with presence through the trees. Her thoughts travel to the four humans sharing this inquiry; as they do, five seagulls appear flying low overhead. She watches them pass and a warm glow fills her body. She feels she has entered a different space – or is it her awareness that has shifted? – and that somehow the gulls overhead have evidenced that the others are there with her too.

Jacqueline's story of her encounter with River shows something of the practice of invocation we developed through the inquiry, in particular, the concrete, embodied language of ceremony. This included: bowing, requesting permission, introducing ourselves, chanting, reading poems, collecting water, and keeping it in a sacred place; offering water, sometimes returning river water, or bringing it from special places; making and offering gifts (paper boats, petals); immersing ourselves and burning incense. At times, the ceremonies were planned, at others spontaneous or even accidental. Jacqueline offers rose petals to River and is startled into a different awareness when they blow back in her face. David finds himself chanting with the fast-running Plessur, remarking: "I don't know the meaning of the chant, it just comes from deep within me… it became a chorus with me, her, me, her and so forth: with her always in the background of my voice."

It would seem that as much as communicating with the river and the beings that live there, these actions condition our own state of awareness. They take us out of the everyday dualist consciousness that enables us to navigate modern life and into an ontopoetic awareness in which the world is infused with subjectivity and seeking to show us something of its being in return.

The world feels different to Peter the moment he steps out of the car and begins to walk down to the River. An early morning mist hangs low over the meadows, the air is fresh, there is birdsong all around; but beyond that, almost subliminally and certainly not open to clear description, he feels the Earth herself gently beating.

*Crossing wet fields, Peter reaches his spot where the River Frome joins the River Avon, a peninsular of land that narrows to a point. He stops and bows, two hands together, remembering David Hinton's description of the bow as a spiritual gesture that offers the self, the centre of identity, to what is beyond (*Hinton, 2012, *p. 32). He introduces himself to River with his given, Medicine, and Sacred names, and asks to be in communion.*

Taking care not to slip on the muddy banks, he scrambles as close to the water as he can. Standing quietly, he notices the deep silence that lies behind the everyday sounds—the hum of traffic, the calling of crows, the wind in the trees. Even a train rumbling noisily over the nearby bridge fails to interrupt the silence.

After a while, Peter takes out the gift he has brought—a jar of rainwater he collected from his home, from the same water catchment as River flows through. He intends to offer it in River's honour, asking for any teachings to be shared.

Stretching over the water he dribbles a stream of rainwater from the jar, watching it splash on the surface. This tentative action however doesn't feel right. Responding to an impulse, he throws the water out over the River as hard as he can. It lands in a shower, the circular splashes made by the drops immediately seized by the current and swept downstream; at the same time the waves from each splash interfere with each other so that for several seconds a complex, mesmeric pattern decorates the water surface—almost a piece of natural op-art—before it dissipates and the natural swirling of the river resumes.

Leaning on his walking pole, gazing down River, Peter waits and watches, wondering how the gesture will be received, if at all? A dark wave under the bridge catches his attention. Peering through the mist, he

sees two swans paddling strongly upstream toward him, one behind the other as if in a little procession. Just as he begins to feel alarmed at how close they might come—for they are big creatures—the front swan veers up the Avon to his right, while the one behind swims up the Frome to his left. Both move out of sight behind bushes.

Peter is taken completely by surprise by this performance. One might say that this was something that just happened as the swans went about their daily business. Yet the unexpected quality of the event washes away any scepticism: he has no doubt that it was also an intentional, choregraphed gesture, a reciprocal act acknowledging his invocation.

Such kinds of ontopoetic events are at the heart of panpsychic practice. If we invoke the world as a living being intentionally (and sometimes tacitly), then the world may respond. Our invocation can be through loving presence and attunement, through song, prayer, pilgrimage, ceremony, and festival; through the language of myth and archetype; and for some, through the language of traditional religion. "Our lives harbour possibilities of poetic manifestation far larger than those defined by the materialist terms of modern societies" (Mathews, 2009, p. 4). It should be noted that there is no guarantee the world will respond or that we can adequately translate any response that may be forthcoming into human meaning.

Such events—when a crack opens in our taken-for-granted world—are moments of grace when for maybe one brief moment, we are open to a completely different world that is nevertheless the same world (Reason, 2014, 2017). In these moments, when the living cosmos responds to us, we feel so intimately and extravagantly blessed, so moved, and shaken on our metaphysical moorings… love of world… becomes our deepest attachment. It replaces self-love as the root of our motivation. (Mathews, 2017c, p. 10).

It is Dave who introduces us to the Dark River. He has bought a canoe and has been enjoying being out on the water in the sunshine. But paddling into muddy, shallow Penpol Creek, he finds a river graveyard, a place where boats are left to die, full of exposed ship's ribs and half-forgotten projects. Back on the main river he finds a dark place, not the sparkling river, but a shadow side, an old dark river of decay. Feeling cast down in a Kali kind of element, the dark feminine of decay, disintegration, and death, he calls this aspect of the Fowey "Hag River." In the same week, Jacqueline finds herself suddenly exclaiming "Love and pain always go together," as if she has somehow become aware of Dave's discovery.

He paddles home to the house across the river in which he lives with his wife Mary. Her parents had lived there for 60 years, she herself had been born there, so her family have a history with this place. Not able to get away from the feeling of something malevolent, Dave tells Mary about his experience on the bank, asking, "Have there been any children lost on the river?" She tells him a tragic story of two local children drowned in a boating accident right opposite the house.

Meanwhile in Canada, Andrea learns that Tah-la-lu is in a lot of trouble, a "river in peril." While her flow has not been impeded by weirs or dams, urbanization is coming close, leaving her badly polluted and placing her on the national list of endangered rivers.

Andrea speaks of the flow of the river, and the rhythm of the tides, and how this causes her to reflect on pregnancy—the weight, the pushing and the yielding—exclaiming, "I never think about pregnancy, I have a grown child!" Clearly there is symbolism in this, so maybe we should have not been surprised when she reports in Cycle 3 that she has only managed to visit Tah-la-lu once this week, having been rushed into hospital for an emergency procedure, reporting "My appendix decided to cause grief, which was fortunate in the long run because it revealed a bigger concern: my lower intestine had become trapped by old scar tissue from a c-section when my daughter was born."

After her initial recovery, feeling sorry and apologetic for not having kept her promise to visit again, Andrea persuades her husband to take her to Tah-la-lu. Telling River what has happened, she finds herself explaining how her daughter's gestational journey was interrupted, jagged, scarring, and how these scars have caused grief for more than two decades.

This leads her to reflect on "scarred lands" and "scarred rivers," places that have been cut into, poisoned, and redirected for human convenience. She asks if River too carries scar memory, a body map of transgressions against her. She remembers the message of "Patience" from the previous week and the associations she made around the ideas of fullness, emptiness, and pregnancy. This leads her to wonder if the water was warning her of what was happening in her own body: was River communicating? It is clear there is a deep, unbounded connection. As Andrea speaks with River, she understands directly that "her trauma is my trauma."

These two stories show how ontopoetic engagement can open us to the pain of the world as well as the beauty and that this can resonate with our own human pain. We are the cause of astounding damage and loss; the other-than-human beings we meet are often damaged both in the course of their being and by the destructive tendencies of modern industrial human activity—evidenced in climate change, the destruction of ecosystems, the extinction of species, and continued injustice and poverty in human society—which causes pain to both human and other-than-human lives.

Recognizing that "love and pain always go together," found us increasingly devoted to our rivers. The practice of connecting with the personhood of rivers was new to us all, and we found the approach had a powerful effect after only one visit. Peter recorded surprise at wanting to visit so much, while Dave confessed to having "romantic feelings" that he felt were reciprocated by River. David shared that River seemed to have fully entered his life, and Jacqueline observed "an intense energy" in her first encounter that saw River expand from the limit of its banks to encompass the whole place. We all shared a strong sense that the rivers had entered us; we each confessed to being enraptured and engaged both with our respective beings and the panpsychic manner of engagement. Andrea summarized this when she confessed to having been left with "a longing to be with" that she had never felt for River before.

The initial feelings of falling in love continued to develop. Andrea identified a "very real sense of love" that rendered her reluctant to leave. Peter and David began to dream about their rivers, and by the end of the second week, everyone spoke of deepening relationships, with the notion that we were falling in love coming to the fore. The sense of connection and closeness was mutual and our corresponding entanglement one of the more surprising outcomes of our research; as our reports began to echo and reflect each other's, we saw how

our feelings for our rivers were extending to all the rivers engaged in the inquiry. Around this time, we began to experience darker, more complex emotions connected with love, reminding us of the paradoxes one must work to embrace when deeply involved in relationship. Andrea described the deep kinship we all felt when she spoke of "the boundary between self and other" as somehow disappearing. In this way, our relationships came full circle, from a beginning that recognized and honored the subjectivity of the more-than-human world, to an experience of oneness with it all, including each other.

We were able to identify four phases to the arc of "falling in love":

1. Meeting and getting to know
2. Falling in deeper
3. Awareness and acceptance of the complexities of love, especially grief and pain
4. Dissolution of the boundary between self and other.

Opening and entering a shared field of communication enabled us to feel that what happens to the earth also happens to us; the result of undergoing such radical shifts in perception of boundaries is a corresponding expansion of self.

These experiences point to the wisdom of deep ecologist Joanna Macy's view that as we experience the world as lover—as an "intimate and gratifying partner"—we find less and less difference between the world and ourselves: "Just as lovers seek union, we are apt, when we fall in love with our world, to fall into oneness with it as well. We begin to see the world as ourselves" (Macy, 1991, pp. 8, 11).

As Mathews notes, falling in love with the world is at the heart of living cosmos panpsychism. Subjectivity is not contained or bound up in separate selves or objects, it is "fluid, mutable, protean." When we fall in love, "we become permeable to another subjectivity. Our subjectivity is cracked open. With astonishment we begin to plumb the other's unsuspected enormity…" (Mathews, 2003, pp. 17–19). Dave caught this insight in a haiku:

> Beauty has a cost
> Mayfly fast or granite slow
> Everything will die.

REFLECTIONS

Since our engagement with rivers was a practice of co-operative inquiry, it is appropriate to reflect on the nature and quality of what has unfolded: what kind of knowing can we claim? Clearly, we cannot, nor would we wish to, lay claim to "findings" in the objective sense of orthodox inquiry. As Mathews argues, from an ontopoetic perspective, encounter with other beings must take priority over knowledge "about" them (Mathews, 2003: chap. 4). In any case, our inquiry was limited in scope and any claims must be suggestive.

Our purpose had been to open ourselves to the possibilities of an ontopoetic relationship with rivers, offering an initial phenomenology of our experiences in the realm of shared meaning making. "To invite reality to use us as terrain for stories in this way is clearly to make an epistemic shift from 'knowledge,' in some objectivist sense, to *imagination* as our primary epistemic modality" (Mathews, 2009, p. 4). Imaginal philosopher James Hillman points out that the literal is always abstract because "reality is so much more than we can ever know or experience or imagine." The challenge is to "unfold the endless tale of reality" (Cheetham, 2015, p. 31). Rather than objective knowledge, we seek a quality of poetic knowing "in the sense of stepping in tune with being, hearing and echoing the music and heartbeat of being" (Bringhurst, 1993, p. 138).

But how do we know we are not fooling ourselves? How do we know that our experiences are not pure fantasy with nothing to do with our invocation of rivers? We suggest, cautiously, four criteria of "veracity":

- Does there appear to be a close, synchronous, relationship between invocation and response? Does the response appear related to our call?
- Is the response, in Bringhurst's sense, in tune with the poetic rhythm of things?
- Are we surprised, taken aback? Does the occurrence confound our expectations?
- Do we feel our subjectivity, our awareness, "cracked open" by the encounter?
- Does the overall experience elicit a profound feeling of joy?

These criteria are suggestive; there are likely many more, strengthening the case for further investigation and articulation.

We see our inquiry as a tiny first step in drawing together the ontopoetics of panpsychism and the practice of co-operative inquiry—just five human persons engaging with eight rivers over 6 weeks. And yet, as we reflect, we cannot but be impressed by the richness of our experience and the suggestive quality of our inquiry, cultivating unexpectedly intimate relationships with our rivers, so they occupied our thoughts and our dreams as if in some way we were "falling in love." We also learned to see how patterns of synchronous events arose, which, as we bracketed away any residual scepticism, could not be seen as random, but self-evidently carried meaning.

Musician Brian Eno recently said in an online discussion, "We won't save the planet unless we fall in love with it" (Salon London, 2020). It is a sentiment that is often heard, in different ways and in different voices. But what does it mean, "to fall in love"?

To fall in love in the truest sense means encountering another in their full subjectivity: one may get obsessed with, but one does not truly fall in love with an *object*. We will only "fall in love" in the way Eno suggests once we experience Earth as a living *subject*, rather than a resource to be exploited, or even a beautiful thing we can admire. We fall in love when our subjectivities permeate each other: "When we fall in love, the world comes alive, and we come alive with it" (Mathews, 2003, p. 19; see also Rose, 1996). Our co-operative inquiry begins to show some ways in which this can happen.

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ENDNOTE

[1] In this paper, the narrative based on data from the co-operative enquiry is printed in *italics*; theory and reflection are interspersed in roman text.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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