

BECOMING ANIMAL



After BECOMING ANIMAL

In an era of rapidly intensifying environmental crises, David Abram – the ecologist and philosopher whose ideas are laced throughout the film, *Becoming Animal* – has argued for a reappraisal of "animism" as a uniquely viable way of experiencing and relating to the more-than-human earth. *Animism* was the style of perception common to virtually all of our indigenous ancestors for at least 50,000 years, and it is still practiced by many traditional, indigenous cultures today. The animistic worldview assumes that everything is alive – animals and plants, to be sure, but also mountains, forests, rivers and dry riverbeds. Even the winds and the weather patterns are felt to be active, animate agencies. Indeed, *any* presence that we perceive with our senses is felt to be a sensitive and perhaps even sentient being in its own right. Yet each being – whether spider or wolf, oak tree or storm cloud – is assumed to be experiencing the world *in its own manner*, curiously different from our experience and that of the other beings around it, each encountering the world from its own angle, according to the capacities of its own flesh.

After Becoming Animal: Three Simple Mind-altering Exercises:

Everything Alive, Awake, and Aware

Inter-breathing

A Technology Sabbath

As you leave the screening today, try this simple exercise as a way of waking up your animal senses:

Relax into your body – slow down your steps, and bring your thoughts to the present moment. As you step out into the day or the night, allow yourself to imagine that *everything* around you is alive. Can you sense, for example, that as you walk upon the ground, the ground underfoot is feeling your footsteps – registering your weight as you step upon it?

Notice that the grasses and the trees are themselves feeling the sunlight (or the absence of it) along their leafy surfaces, as they stretch the tips of their roots through the soil in search of water. All species in the biosphere are deeply related, and even share a common evolutionary ancestry. Hence humans and plants are actually variants of one another. So... try to extend your bodily imagination to sense what might it feel like to be a tree, constantly ingesting the sunlight overhead while drinking up water from below, transmuting that warmth and that water into flesh.

1

Everything Alive, Awake, and Aware



Inter-breathing



2

Bring attention to your breathing, becoming mindful of the air as it streams in through your nostrils, filling and swelling your chest before you exhale. Notice that your exhaled breath is now blending with the air currents around you. Are there grasses nearby, or a few trees? These too, of course, are metabolizing, breathing beings. Of course, there would be no air for us to inhale if oxygen were not being exhaled by all the plants around us, as a by-product of their photosynthetic metabolism.

*The atmosphere of this planet is not just a bunch of gases held to Earth by Earth's gravity. No! Rather, the atmosphere is actually a living organ of the planet, a remarkable membrane quietly generated by all of us – the animals, the plants and the microorganisms – ceaselessly exchanging our breath with one another. Through such **inter-breathing**, we continually generate and replenish the atmosphere, the very medium that life needs to live. Along with the other animals, we humans inhale the oxygenated air into our lungs and circulate its nourishment throughout our limbs, exchanging the oxygen for carbon dioxide before breathing the air back out into the world. The carbon dioxide that we exhale is precisely the ingredient that the trees, the herbs, the grasses and the wildflowers all depend upon to fire the process of photosynthesis. **Hence what we animals breathe out, all of the plants around us are breathing in – while what the plants breathe out, all of us animals are breathing in!***

Breathe deeply, in and out, with awareness of this reciprocal exchange going on between your organism and all the green plants, all the leafing and needled trees around you.

Whenever we contemplate the surrounding atmosphere as a living organ, or membrane, of the Earth, we begin to notice that the space that surrounds us – the empty space between us wherever we find ourselves – is not really empty at all. We live enveloped by air, bodily immersed in this invisible (yet palpable) atmosphere as thoroughly as fish are immersed in the sea. If we consider that this atmosphere extends many kilometers up from the ground, *then we begin to realize that we do not live ON the Earth. Rather we live IN the Earth!*

Our animal senses – our eyes, our ears, our skin, nostrils, and taste buds – have coevolved with the sensuous terrain around us. Hence, from the moment of birth, our senses are already attuned to the colors, tastes and textures of the more-than-human natural world. There is an instinctive reciprocity between our sensing bodies and the sensuous terrain. The activity of sensory perception functions to bind our separate nervous systems into the encompassing ecosystem.

Why then, do many persons seem so oblivious, today, to the rest of nature? Why are we not alarmed by the massive present-day assaults to the animate earth, by the ongoing pollution of the winds and the waters? Why are we not – all of us! – protesting vigorously against the spreading extinctions, against the damming of wild rivers and the clearcutting of the last old-growth forests? If sensory perception spontaneously binds our own experience to that of the animate Earth, how can it be that we are so casually, by our lifestyles, bringing about the wreckage of this wild-flourishing world?

The answer is perhaps fairly simple. It is due to the fact that innumerable technologies now insert themselves between our bodily senses and the earthly sensuous. Countless computer screens, cell phones, and headsets now short-circuit the instinctive rapport between our bodies and the living land. Sensory perception now binds us into an exclusively human field of signs, symbols and signals, while the palpable Earth falls away from our experience. Of course, many of us now use digital technologies to communicate with one another, to stay abreast of the news and even to inform ourselves regarding new environmental problems. Yet the net effect of all our online engagements is that our creaturely senses are now deflected from the sensuous earth, and are instead captured and caught within a purely human field of interaction – while the wild, more-than-human terrain no longer even registers in our conscious awareness.

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The simplest way to counter this trend is not to renounce technology, but rather to set some simple limits on our participation with technology. Choose a single day of the week and resolve to refrain from using digital technologies (neither computers nor cellphones) for just that entire day. Simply by turning off all our digital gadgets for one whole day a week, we soon find our bodily senses awakening from a kind of slumber, remembering and reacquainting themselves with the colors, textures, and sounds of the local Earth. Just a single day a week serves to recalibrate our nervous system, enabling a realignment of our lives with the land around us.

Thanks

Let us know of your experience of these practices or of the film by emailing becominganimal@scotdoc.com or contact us via:

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And if you're interested in reading further, David Abram's books include:

*The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language
in a More-than-Human World*

Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology

becominganimalfilm.com