

## Why Do We Think What We Think?

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Revised, 21 March 2011

One of the key aspects of cultural evolution is the epistemology of its people. Given that every thought is born from experience and exposure to antecedent thoughts, it is important continually to ask ourselves: From where do our ideas originate and what is the source of our understandings? Aboriginal peoples, whose critical resources all had to be within walking distance, necessarily were in tune with the health and well-being of those resources. The plants, animals, local waters, and the land itself became looked upon as integral components of their families, not metaphorically, but literally. As with their genetic relatives, they were loved for who they were and nurtured in accordance with the manifest needs of all.

The experiences of the people were formed from these relationships. The sources of all understanding originated in the real, authentic world around them. Stories were conceived and passed along that reinforced and enlivened these understandings. As a botanist whose very craft is the understanding of plants and animals in restoration efforts, I have learned that ultimate wisdom does not reside in the minds of professors with well-oiled doctrines and numerous refereed papers. Indeed, their contemporary papers will modify understandings of those who went before, even including their own works if they live long enough, stay active, and are not hampered with excessive ego. One would think that, at some point, these scientists would develop, through inductive logic, sufficient humility to notice that their understandings today render them as infinitely disconnected as ever.

I have learned that plants and animals are not ego-driven, tenure-tracked, prone to mendacity, hungry for power or wealth, or beguiled by doctrine or the charismatic. If we steward the remnant landscape in accordance with the age-old aboriginal Way to which the native plants and animals are adapted, these plants and animals will flourish. If we default to contemporary ecological theories of land management of neglect or if we allow ourselves to integrate what we believe is politically or logistically practical or expedient, these same plants and animals will languish and eventually their lights will go out. The extent to which their lights go out is the extent to which we suffer ecological macular degeneration.

A pilot who ignores the fundamentals of his aircraft's configuration will lose altitude and the proper attitude for flight. He and his craft eventually will reacquaint themselves with the ground in an ungraceful way. Sea captains know that Force 5 storms are not

interested how intelligent he is, could care less if he means well or is having personal or logistical problems. If they ignore the realities of the sea, they will perish unceremoniously. For some reason, our culture does not seem to think that there are realities in life on land as well. Nature simply is uninterested in our opinion that we stand at the zenith of creativity and innovation, always able to leap from one catastrophe to another.

It is only a salubrious relationship with the natural world that can provide us healthy food, clean water, and air of an appropriate chemistry in perpetuity. A species such as ourselves, one that makes conscious choices about our relationship with the earth will be served well most assuredly if our relationship is based upon a knowledge of and empathy for the natural world, which is the only “real” world there really is. So long as nature is perceived as a back drop, a scene, a place to play or vacation, a mere topic of study, elements of a garden, or a zoo for our amusement we will continue facilitate the progressive dissipation of the very necessary infrastructure of our health and happiness.

Most of us who grew up as the “Last Child in the Woods” are presumed not to suffer from “nature deficit disorder.” Yet, it was this generation that has done more in 75 years to destroy the last of the woods within which we were raised. The more educated and prosperous, the larger the cabin we build in the woods; the larger the drug-dependent rug with its lollipop trees and poodle shrubs, the larger the perennial bed with red lava rock or wood-chip mulch—the greater the area of pavement and tilled-out commodity-scale landscapes. Clearly, while a critical human need, simply growing up capering in rivers and woods does not necessarily provide an epistemological basis for the unraveling of the doctrine of *apartheid* that our culture has with the rest of the living world.

With each new child the opportunities for the world are born anew—open to the epistemological realm of their upbringing. The challenge for all who enter into any pedagogic relationship with children is to provide an example that shows Man to be in consilience with the rest of life, not dominant over it or with supercilious attitudes toward those living things that do not look like us.

If there is to be a seventh generation with a life worth living, we had better start behaving as though we cared, we had better ask ourselves, why do we think what we think, value what we value, and do what we do. Having done so, we must, through colloquium and dialogue, collaborate on the development of pedagogic and community models that challenge our contemporary doctrines. We must develop a set of first principles that organize themselves around the idea that we are an inextricable and integral part of the living world, then develop strategies, tactics, operations, logistics, and personnel, *etc.*, that can work toward that end. Certain to falter at first, and with a relatively small part of our population with us, we must stay with it.