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## *The Skill of Ecological Perception*

LAURA SEWALL

PSYCHOLOGY IS A RICH and varied field, encompassing diverse viewpoints and perspectives. While clinical psychologists struggle with the complexities of human pain and healing, research psychologists pursue insights into the human condition gleaned from laboratory experimentation and scientific analysis. This essay illustrates how the knowledge gained through one area of psychological research—perceptual psychology—can contribute to ecological awareness. Perceptual psychologist Laura Sewall points out that our sensory capacities—taste, smell, sight, hearing, and touch—are the fundamental avenues of connection between self and world. She argues that the deadening of our senses is at the heart of the environmental crisis and that reawakening them is an integral step toward renewing our bond with the Earth. Specifically focusing on vision, she offers five perceptual practices that can help us to “come to our senses.”

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*Set aside the learned ways of perceiving the world as dead matter for your use and see if you can recover again your actual perception of the world as a community of beings to whom you are meaningfully related.*

ERAZIM KOHÁK

*The ecological crisis may be the result of a recent and collective perceptual disorder in our species, a unique form of myopia which it now forces us to correct.*

DAVID ABRAM

I take David Abram's statement quite literally. Our "collective myopia" is one manifestation of psychic numbing—a psychological defense against witnessing the world's pain. It is a form of denial that shields us from fully experiencing the latest reports on ozone depletion, increasing pollution, toxicity, poverty, illness, and the death of species. Full awareness hurts. In response we build defenses, twist ourselves into something we collectively label as variations on the themes of madness or depression, or we choose between a variety of convenient distractions. And, in a culture with the luxury to do so, we turn down the volume. We become numbed to our feelings, to what we might hear and see; in part, we suffer from collective myopia. Unfortunately, it doesn't stop there. Our myopic defense blinds us to the urgency and severity of current Earth conditions. Consequently, we continue our destructive and habitual behavior. We deny the need to change, and the need for radical reevaluation of ourselves. In the midst of collective denial, we further perpetuate the destruction of the biosphere. Our collective myopia thus becomes both cause and effect of the environmental crisis.

Nonetheless, we are beginning to recognize the human dimensions of our ecological and social crises. Many of us are searching for explanations of our misbehavior toward one another and the Earth and asking how we might have brought this upon ourselves. These explanations are numerous and provocative, including the advent of agriculture or industrialization, a dichotomous Judeo-Christian paradigm of good and evil, and the legacy of a Cartesian interpretation of reality.

In *The Voice of the Earth*, Theodore Roszak presents a provocative theory that the roots of our collective misbehavior can be found in the historic and conceptual split between "in-here" and "out-there." This dichotomy manifests as the large and despairing gap we feel between ourselves and nonhuman nature. In response, Deep Ecology and progressive psychology have begun to flesh out a conception of an ecological self, in which the division between inner and outer worlds becomes an

arbitrary and historical distinction. In contradiction to an identity in which the mature self is culturally defined as fully individuated and possessing intact, absolute, decisive, and divisive boundaries, the ecological self experiences a permeability and fluidity of boundaries. This manifests as an empathy and identity with family, friend, lover, community, humanity, and similarly, with the whole of the nonhuman world. An empathy and identity with all that is ideally translates into a radical awareness of interdependence—a recognition that to tread heavily on the Earth is to tread heavily upon one's self.

My hope for a sophisticated response to contemporary ecological and psychological conditions calls for a return to our essential, animal selves, the selves that evolved in relation to the nonhuman natural world. In particular, our sensory systems are exquisitely evolved channels for translating between "in-here" and "out-there." Fifty percent of the cortex of the brain is thought to be devoted to processing visual information, indicating a profound, evolutionary commitment to vision as a means of joining inner and outer conditions. From a pragmatic perspective, this means that perceptual practice can ameliorate cultural conditioning and psychic numbing by reawakening our senses and intentionally honoring subjective experience.

This notion is consistent with James Hillman's prescription for preservation. He suggests that we are aesthetically or sensually numb, and that the soul longs for a reawakening of pleasure and beauty. In Hillman's view, it is a contemporary moral imperative to refine our aesthetic sense, and in so doing, we begin to feel a deepened sensuality and a relinquishing of boundaries that separate. We begin to care for that which we see, and ideally, we find ourselves loving the material world, our Earth. Because love alters behavior, honoring sensory and sensual experience may be fundamental to the preservation of the Earth.

There is another major rationale for developing a perceptual practice. Perception, consciousness, and behavior are as radically interdependent as the rest of our biosphere. Thus, perceptual shifts alter consciousness, consciousness alters behavior, and even unconscious leanings alter perception. Given our blatant need for ecologically conscious and consistent behavior, the development of skillful ways of seeing offers a direct path for consciousness intervention and behavioral change.

Skillful perception is a devotional practice. It is essentially learning to

see, and thus consists of cultivating those aspects of the visual process that are modifiable, or that can be developed by a kind of mindfulness. In relation to developing an ecological consciousness, skillful perception necessarily includes emphasizing perceptual practices that help us to extend our narrow experience of self and to experience sensuality, intimacy, and identification with the external world. Skillful perception is the practice of intentionally sensing with our eyes, pores, and hearts wide open. It requires receptivity and the participation of our whole selves, despite the potential pain. It means fully witnessing both the magnificence and destruction of our Earth. It is allowing one's identity and boundaries to be permeable and flexible. I refer to this way of perceiving as ecological perception. Mindfulness and practice brought to the entirety of our sensory experience clearly serve to alter consciousness and behavior. Ecological perception is most essentially the perception of dynamic relationships.

There are five perceptual practices that I have identified as both modifiable by experience and directly relevant for perceiving our ecological conditions. These practices include (1) learning to attend, or to be mindful, within the visual domain; (2) learning to perceive relationships, context, and interfaces; (3) developing perceptual flexibility across spatial and temporal scales; (4) learning to re-perceive depth; and (5) the intentional use of imagination.

### *1. Learning to Attend*

Learning to attend is the first step in developing an ecological way of seeing. Attending is the flip side of psychic numbing; it is the enhancement of selected sensory information. Focused attention produces a richness of color, a depth of sensory experience, and often means the difference between seeing and not seeing. The ability to fully use our attentional capacity is a learned skill, requiring the practice of mindfulness and awareness. Attention is currently defined as both "endogenous" and "exogenous." Endogenous attention refers to a kind of perceptual readiness. It is the largely unconscious placement of one's focus on internal desires, needs, and priorities. It acts as a filter or gate, selecting particular information from the visual field. This process serves to affirm our expectations and help us to identify what we are looking for; when I am hungry, restaurant signs "pop out" of any long row of commercial

buildings. Endogenous attention also refers to a focus on the familiar or exciting. For example, when I begin to see the difference between two species of cholla cactus, and am excited by my discovery, the vast garden of cacti suddenly shifts and becomes richly differentiated; full, round, fuzzy cactus arms are suddenly in distinctive contrast to long, lanky cactus bodies. And with my attention oriented toward newfound distinctions, I am no longer able to see the desert landscape as populated by a single species of cholla. This form of attention works in reverse as well; my first two weeks of working in a Tanzanian game park were most notable for what I couldn't see. My experienced companions readily saw eland, giraffe, and gazelle among acacia and tamarind trees. Having no familiarity with African wildlife, I looked and looked, to no avail. Slowly however, with growing familiarity, my ability to spot animals became equally refined. Thus endogenous or internally oriented attention serves to select or filter incoming information in accordance with familiarity and expectations, and with forms of mental arousal: excitement, desire, and need.

By filtering the visual world consistent with previous experience or mental states, endogenous attention builds and perpetuates one's view of reality. This is both problematic and useful. By selecting information to be consistent with expectations and familiarity, endogenous attention may reinforce habitual judgment, dislike, and denial. Alternatively, if we attend to intentionally chosen and unabashedly value-laden priorities, we alter the ways in which we filter information, and consequently, interpret the visual world. Thus, if we wish to "see as if the Earth matters," or tease and stimulate our aesthetic sensibilities, we must be prepared to see beauty. This requires nurturing one's aesthetic desire and taking a moment to observe texture, curvature, form, color, or the soft slope of a grassy, golden hillside cast against an enormous blue sky. It takes a moment, and initially requires conscious participation and recognition. It requires noticing what one notices, and choosing to honor that which appeals and provokes, and is felt within one's body and soul. With practice, that which was noticed and given aesthetic value soon "pops out" of a landscape. Our intention becomes a new habit, a new way of seeing, and one becomes easily drawn to beauty, and thus to loving the landscape.

Exogenous attention, on the other hand, refers to the way in which

our gaze is drawn to novelty or change within the visual field. From an evolutionary perspective, it is essentially a focusing of energy for the purpose of locating potential opportunities or threats. It is locating the bear in split seconds, or for the skilled tracker, it is noticing any change in the landscape, even across considerable distance or among a chaotic background of scattered, fallen leaves. It is spotting the osprey resting among a coastline of tall pines. To develop this ability, one must nurture a receptive stance and a sensitivity to spatial and temporal changes within the landscape. This particular form of attention seems to be most susceptible to psychic numbing; when numb, we notice as little as possible. Thus, intentionally nurturing this form of awareness requires getting out of one's head; it is opening one's self.

Attention, focused both internally and externally, is an exceptionally dynamic, fluid, and flexible process. Because some degree of attentional focusing is automatic, we take our ability to attend for granted. But research in perceptual psychology has demonstrated that (1) one's ability to visually attend is a learned skill, requiring effort; (2) attending has facilitatory, or beneficial, effects for processing visual information; and (3) the placement of our attentional focus may fully determine our subjective reality. This research obviously implies that learning to attend has profound implications for receiving and interpreting the tremendous variety and magnificence of the visual world.

Further, there is evidence suggesting that attentional patterns may physically alter the neural pathways in the brain. This research was initiated by David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel's Nobel Prize-winning work identifying the structure, development, and modification of the visual cortex.<sup>1</sup> More recently, research has indicated that the activation of attentional mechanisms is necessary for structural change to occur within the visual cortex. Structural changes are essentially alterations in the strength of the synaptic connections between neurons, causing the formation of new neural associations and pathways. The synaptic connections are strengthened as a function of activity and, most significant, in conjunction with the presence of neurotransmitters subserving attentional mechanisms. Once strengthened, a synapse requires a lower threshold of input to fire, or to pass a signal down its neural pathway.

1. David H. Hubel and Torsten N. Wiesel, "Functional Architecture of Macaque Monkey Visual Cortex," *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, series B, 198 (1977), 1-59.

This strengthening facilitates the activation of entire neural networks. Because each neuron has many hundreds of synaptic connections to other neurons, the strengthening of a particular connection may alter the routing of a signal, thus forming or activating a new neural pathway. Theoretically, neural networks constitute our schemata, which determine the ready categorization of visual input. In practical terms, this process suggests that visual system structure, or neural networks, determine our perceptual tendencies. Thus, by strengthening particular synapses, and consequently particular neural pathways, our attentional choices not only select and enhance specific information, but also influence the ways we categorize visual input. It is therefore important to become conscious of where and how we direct our attention.

In sum, our attentional focus, both internally and externally, influences and creates subjective reality by facilitating the perception of some objects, relations, and events to the exclusion of others. Despite the highly subjective nature of perception (due to attentional processes), we make behavioral choices based on what we see. In the context of the role consciousness and behavior play in perpetuating our ecological crisis, the research clearly suggests that we would be wise to become mindful of where we place our attention. Learning to attend is, in essence, a spiritual practice. It is mindfulness in the visual domain. According to Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, the first step in a spiritual practice is the cultivation of a "wakeful presence." If this is mindfulness, then attention may, in addition, bring us spiritually closer to the visible world. Any deity knows we need it.

## 2. Perceiving the Relations

We have a materialistic culture. We are interested in identifying, naming, and obtaining objects. In addition, our intellectual tradition supports objectification or the separation between "in-here" and "out-there." This dichotomization extends far into the conceptual realm: the spiritual is cleaved from the material, and the sensual is antithetical and problematic for the rational. The reduction of wholes and systems into component parts lies at the heart of many of our intellectual traditions. As a consequence, we readily perceive *things* and are relatively insensitive to the relationships between them. We are not particularly adept at perceiving the interface between media and forces, context, or processes,

and we rarely "read the signs," or perceive the potential depth of our own relationship with the world "out-there." Rather, our identity is conceptually independent of the biosphere upon which we depend, and our perceptual tendency is to see objects.

Alternatives to object identification exist. One example is how Barry Lopez describes the Inuit way of perceiving a wolf. We might say, "a male wolf does this." An Inuit is likely to say, "a male wolf, on a mid-summer's day in which the clouds were particularly billowy and white, when the sun was nearly overhead, and when a caribou grazed within a half mile, does this." Inuits perceive context and refer to it continually. As identifiers of objects, those of us who are subject to Western, culturally determined perceptual behavior rarely consider context. Context adds a dimension of complexity out of keeping with our desire for fact, or "absolute truth."

One way to make this shift from perceiving objects to perceiving context or relations is to observe the interface between water and land. Water flows all over rocks and sand. We can see water flow over, under, and around. We see water deflect, merge, lick, crash, and softly lap up against. We see water reflect like giant mirrors. We see it take away and give back, and we see all of this in relation to land. And we may notice that flow is the relationship. It is the dynamic property of what may be the most essential and contrasted material relationship within our experience. It is the interface between elemental forces; ocean and land, river and mountain. It is where erosion meets resistance, hard meets soft, still meets fluid, and where tawny-colored sand meets deep blue water.

Visual contrast identifies where everything meets everything else. It catches our attention and points to the interface, the place where merging and interdependence happen. Among other things, contrast depicts change and influence. If one is sensitive, visual contrast also feels good. For example, it feels good when one enters Skull Valley and first glimpses the old cottonwoods. They form a long curving line, winding in slow arcs along the creek. In contrast to the high desert, spreading for many miles in all directions, they are big, billowy, beautiful things. They are brilliant green against bone-dry, sun-drenched desert. They indicate the presence of water and quench a visual thirst.

Contrast represents the most fundamental of relations within the visual world. Contrast effects demonstrate that perception changes as a

function of relatedness within the visual world; in other words, perception differs when objects are seen in relationship, rather than within a kind of perceptual isolation. Therefore, an inclusive, relational view of the world differs in appearance from one consisting of quantified, utilitarian objects. If we legitimize and practice a relational view, we act in response to a world that reveals forces and vibrancy, one that appears dynamic, and by extension, alive. This practice allows for our own engagement. We may find ourselves being "part of," or "in relationship with." It follows that subjective reality matters.

Giving full credence to subjective reality means valuing our participation with the world. Participation implies inserting one's consciousness into the space between ourselves and the Other. The insertion of consciousness makes meaning and metaphor; it allows frogs to become princes, ravens to become messengers, and gnarly old oaks to be grandfathers. As we attribute meaning and dynamism to water and rock, and as we allow animism and vitalism to exist in the field of our consciousness, we might also perceive ourselves as part of an exchange, the human dimension of which is observation, story, and "reading the signs." "Reading the signs" is the attentive observation of the landscape, and refers to both the meaning we attribute to the landscape and to believing the message. Although this process may challenge our culturally constructed reality, it represents a highly prized ability among the Yoruba people of Nigeria; it guides the tracker and the shaman, and may be the essence of creating a mutually respectful relationship between ourselves and the nonhuman world. By reading the signs, we bring conscious participation to the moment of observation, making visible the previously unseen. Thus, conscious participation is essentially the creation of meaning and, by definition, value, unimpeded by material concerns.

When fueled by beauty and sensuality, our relationship with the visible world may move our hearts. As the visible world becomes meaningful and vital, we feel it in our bodies. The sensory world thus becomes directly embodied in us; the relationship is visceral, and subjective experience becomes sensuality. We fall in love. Participation in this way is essential if we are to care enough for Earth; we need to view her through "love eyes." Under romantic influence, her appearance will undoubtedly change. No matter. We must value our subjective and sensual response as if all our lives depend on it.

Relationships in the visible world are indicative of processes, systems, and the ways in which forces interact, influence, support, and degrade. It is important that we learn to see them, for they signify both the ways in which the elements and forces of nature come together and our own undeniable relatedness. Learning to see the relations requires time to observe and attention to contrast, to the interface between things. Visible relationships are signified by qualities, such as color and curvature, texture, and the juxtaposition of forms. For example, in northern California, the Mendocino hills on late-summer afternoons are golden, gentle, and overlapping. They dive into and rise from one another, and capture the potency of form. Our own relationship with the visible world is enhanced by metaphor and meaning, and again, by taking time to look. Participation is felt by sensations in our bodies and shifts in our hearts—by a sweet and unmistakable resonance.

### 3. *Perceptual Flexibility*

The third step to an ecological way of seeing is the development of perceptual flexibility. It requires a fluidity of mind in which the magic of the visible world is revealed by relinquishing one's expectations and nurturing a freshness of vision. It is seeing familiar patterns within apparent chaos, rearranging the pieces and allowing a new image to emerge. For example, the symmetry between a rocky shoreline and its reflection may suddenly become both pattern and metaphor, revealing statues, Buddhas, and arrows pointing upriver.

Perceptual flexibility requires very little training. Visual illusions are especially useful for encouraging flexibility because they provide instantaneous feedback. A Necker cube is a classic visual illusion that demonstrates the fluidity, almost fickleness, of perception. A Necker cube is a simple line drawing, showing all twelve edges of a cube. With a mere leaning of thought, a Necker cube typically bounces between two distinct appearances. The illusion is a perceptual reversal in which four edges, initially depicting the nearest face of the cube, perceptually shift such that the same four edges suddenly depict the back side of the cube. For some observers, the Necker cube may stubbornly linger as a solid, unchanging box. With a few moments of perseverance, however, most observers are able to shift perspectives with ease. The flexibility required for larger shifts in perspective feels very similar. Given a bit of willfulness

and a stretch of one's imagination, a rock wall may suddenly become a familiar person's profile, or the reflection at the water's edge may depict arrows or signs to be followed. The perspective shifts, and if one chooses to listen, the landscape speaks.

Seeing a face in a vast rock wall is an easy perceptual leap; we have a natural tendency to look for the familiar, or to make meaning out of the visible world. Looking for the face as an intentional practice prepares one for larger, and perhaps more relevant, stretches of perception and imagination. Perceptual flexibility includes what I refer to as fractal consciousness, or the perceptual ability to make comprehensible leaps across spatial scale. It is the ability to perceive self-similar patterns at a variety of spatial scales. With the addition of curiosity and knowledge, fractal consciousness may serve as a doorway. For example, a pencil-thin runoff from a single rainstorm may spill, twist, and turn like the nearby creek, or mirror a river; with imagination, this may translate into the recognition of a massive drainage system. This stretch of perception is easily followed by the recognition that the Colorado River, for example, drains much of Colorado west of the Continental Divide, as well as large sections of Utah and parts of other states, but never empties into the Gulf of California. One might ask what happens to the river water, and learn that it is taken for irrigation or beef production, for water shares, and for human consumption, all of which drain the river dry. Thus, fractal consciousness may serve to extend awareness to more inclusive dimensions, such as that of the Colorado drainage, or of the biosphere. With practice, the perception of interrelatedness may become increasingly accessible, and perhaps, unavoidable.

As a further extension, fractal consciousness may similarly be built into the perception of time, thus encouraging the ability to perceive a temporal reality beyond the scheduled, urban, closeted self. This frees time from our imposition of form, which makes it into "stuff" whose value is quantified, subdivided, and billed by the hour. We can begin to stretch our imaginations to encompass time scales far beyond that of a human lifetime: what are the implications of perceiving, truly perceiving, forest time? Fractal consciousness in relation to time may be used to develop foresight, or the ability to shift between a time scale based in minutes to one in which the lifetime of a redwood becomes the unit of measurement or point of reference. Foresight capability thus provides a

relative perspective of time; the lifetime of a redwood depends on numerous environmental conditions, including temperature and soil composition, rainfall, and logging. Perceptual flexibility across time and events provides an opportunity to predict the ways in which human-scaled time interacts with the pace of Earth processes, for example, the way erosion and the deposition of nutrients interact with the depletion of topsoil due to contemporary forestry and farming techniques. Foresight provides the opportunity to "view" and consider the world we will leave to our grandchildren.

#### 4. Reperceiving Depth

The fourth element of an ecological way of seeing concerns the way we perceive depth. Reperceiving depth is most concerned with a change in worldview and associated proprioceptive responses, rather than a literal change in visual habits. It involves talking to ourselves and allowing a sensual response that comes from a recognition of being within, held by, and always touched by Earth and air.

In "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," David Abram suggests that depth is the primordial dimension, because we are entirely *in* depth. If we adopt a Gaian interpretation, we are *within* the biosphere as opposed to *on* a planet. Conventional reductionistic science defines depth egocentrically, or as that which is out in front of us: it is the narrow part of the visual field in which signals from both eyes overlap. This conception of depth perpetuates a worldview in which separation is enhanced; like any worldview, this influences the ways in which we actually perceive. In contrast, Abram defines depth with a biocentric emphasis, and with reference to the implications of viewing one's self as *within* the biosphere: "For many who have regained a genuine depth perception, recognizing their own embodiment as entirely internal to, and thus wholly dependent upon, the vaster body of the Earth, the only possible course of action is to begin planning and working on behalf of the ecological world which they now discern."<sup>2</sup>

Abram suggests consciously choosing a way of seeing in which our

2. David Abram, "Merleau-Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," *Environmental Ethics* (Summer 1988), 101–120.

organic embeddedness is deeply recognized. The recognition of *being within* carries with it a number of psychological repercussions. Quite noticeably, a sense of being within produces a distinct vulnerability; it is a recognition of one's psychological permeability and lack of control. But there is also a kind of ecstatic liberation, a freeing from the need to control. One feels a relinquishing of defenses and separation, and with it a mysterious sensuality. Conceptually, being within and "wholly dependent upon" the body of the Earth requires a kind of communication or exchange not unlike that shared with a lover.

If we are part of a communication system within the Gaian organism, then perception is our best channel for listening, and for communication. But Abram points out that our notions of communication, as an activity, are limited by twentieth-century frenzy and techno-habits. He suggests that true perception is more akin to communion, a kind of non-verbal, spirited form of communication. Perception then becomes a vehicle for communion with the nonhuman natural world and may be experienced as a spiritual practice. We experience reverence, simply by looking.

Altering one's sense of living *on* a planet is perhaps best practiced by hiking into a canyon. Within a deep canyon, one experiences verticality. Verticality is a visual dimension that becomes less familiar as it increases. Thus the deeper one goes, the greater potential for transcending perceptual habits. Verticality conveys being among, or within. The Grand Canyon is vertical and red, cast against a bright blue background. It is a provocative landscape, hard to define and easy to feel. Within the Grand Canyon, I feel my whole body in relationship with Earth; she is laid open and inviting. As I work hard to go deeper, my defenses dissolve, and I am vulnerable and receptive. Receptivity facilitates identification; I often find myself spontaneously identifying with much that I see, and much that I see is absolutely gorgeous. It is powerful medicine, particularly in an age of disembodiment and disenchantment. Sensing our embeddedness within the biosphere may also be practiced with imagination: imagine being seen by trees, boulders, and stones, by rivers and animals. Imagine that they are watching. It produces a notable, sensual experience of being "part of," within something magnificent and much vaster than ourselves.

## 5. *The Imaginal Self*

The fifth element of an ecological way of seeing is imagination, the practice of visual imagery. Learning to work with visual imagery shows us the power of our worldview to determine perception and, ultimately, reality. Among other benefits, imagination provides the opportunity to invent our worldview.

The images we carry, or the visions we create, are significant determinants of subjective reality and choice, and consequently, of our world's future. Images serve as guides, or templates for the myriad unconscious decisions we make; they inform us of our own previously determined desires and priorities, and we act accordingly.

Unfortunately, we have lost, or nearly lost, the power of our active imaginations. The ubiquity of television, canned and capitalized media imagery, psychic numbing, and widespread disempowerment have served to replace images spontaneously generated from one's vast imaginal self. We have unconsciously, and perhaps irresponsibly, relinquished our ability to imagine. As an antidote, we simply need to practice. Rekindling this ability requires the active engagement of one's imagination and includes taking time to lie on a soft floor, on a bed of moss, or covered in silky sand. With practice, one's ability to imagine becomes colorful, vivid, creative, and emotionally provocative, thus enriching and influencing our psychological experience. With practice, we can develop clear visions, images for our children, for the future, to which we will be devoted. These visions are the images to nurture and feed with psychological energy. They are the images that may guide our daily, unconscious choices. They are the images that will serve to create the world in which we wish to live.

### *A Message from Gaia*

The Earth speaks to us through our bodies and psyches. She often cries, and many of us feel her tears and see her pain. Recognizing her voice is perception. I experience it as a force of nature entering me, like light. In other moments, I feel as if Mercury has delivered a handwritten message from Gaia, signed by all the relations. Their signatures are patterns in snow, or squawks and screeches, or abstract forms shifting into patterns

and symbols, and a sense of the sacred. In those moments, it feels as if the Earth is calling for me to awaken.

The Earth calls continually. She calls us with beauty, sometimes truly breathtaking, sometimes heart wrenching, and always provocative and visceral. We are embedded in a multidimensional web of beauty. It is where we are, *now*. We are also at the interface between an objectified world and postmodern relativism, between a kind of cultural arrogance and unified traditions. Matthew Fox calls it an "age of weddings." Martha Heyneman refers to this era as a "moment of grace," in which great transformations may occur. The moment calls for the re-perceiving of our Earth, for perceiving the myriad and magical relations that may inform an ecological ethic. If we are receptive to the ways in which the landscape speaks to us, or the ways in which perception serves as a channel for communion, we may reawaken and preserve a sense of human integrity within the family of all relations.