

Water Tied to the Trees,
by Ayme Ahrens,
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When I was twenty, I worked for an ecophysiology lab at the University of Wyoming, and I spent a summer in the Sonoran Desert outside of Tucson, AZ, on a research campaign. We were investigating how climate change would alter the distribution of velvet mesquite trees, and in turn how that new distribution would affect water availability in desert communities. This involved collecting hundreds of stem, leaf, gas and soil samples. To get to our collection sites, we would drive for hours down unmarked dirt roads and then hike on foot to reach isolated and seemingly endless stretches of mesquite bosque. On one field day, deep in the desert and miles from any human habitation, I noticed a liter jug of water tied to one of the mesquite trees with paracord. I had seen one the day before and hadn't thought much of it at the time, but seeing another made me curious. I asked a coworker what they were for. He said, Not far from here there is a poorly patrolled stretch of the US-Mexico border, and many people crossing into the US walk across there. The tradeoff for low security is the risky terrain; crossing there meant walking for days or weeks, unprepared, through the desert, and people often died of dehydration on their journey. The bottles I kept seeing were water supplies that strangers left for thirsty migrants to find, to help them on their way. I felt like someone was ringing a bell in my mind. I was so struck by the rightness of this act of love for people these strangers would never meet. And I thought, *yes. This is what we are for.*

Author and activist Charles Eistenstein says that every culture has a dominant narrative, a story that answers questions like who are we? Why are we here? Why do things happen? Our story, what he calls the Story of Separation, goes something like this: I am an individual mote of consciousness, a soul encased in flesh, separate from you and separate from the environment. I am genetically programmed to maximize my rational self interest. I compete with you for limited resources, where more for me means less for you. Achieving power over others, achieving dominion over nature: this is western man's purpose, and his reward will be utopia, a long life free from labor, disease, or despair. No one had to tell us this story; it's baked into the cake of modern western culture. It's how our society defines right living and human purpose. The trouble is, of course, that the promises of this narrative have never been delivered. Utopia has yet to be seen.

Individualism and the ways we separate ourselves from each other hurt us: borders, racial tension, party affiliations, denomination wars, suburbs where we drive directly into our garages and therefore never see our neighbors, electronic devices that replace eyes and voices with lines of text. These are lines we draw around ourselves, separating us from others, and rather than enhancing our ability to seize power over our competitors, as the story goes, these lines become the prisons we build ourselves. Me separate from you, and you separate from him, and all of us alone. We feel that something is not right, something is missing, and we struggle to find that thing that will make us whole again. We buy to excess, we eat to excess, we work to excess, we seek superficial connection and validation on social media and still we are sicker and sadder and lonelier than we have ever been.

In 2020 we divided ourselves in the most literal possible way *and we wilted*. Some of us got COVID, but all of us felt the deep illness of separation. We lived in a world without the normal trappings of life, without work, without any kind of certainty, but what we missed most was each other: seeing the faces and feeling the embraces of the people we love. Attending weddings and greeting new babies and holding the hands of our loved ones as they died.

Separating ourselves from our environment doesn't seem to be the right path, either. Man versus nature sounds like a reality TV show, but we have made it just reality. I watched a documentary recently about man's dominion over nature. It featured shots of the garbage clogged coasts of southeast Asia, stories of whole communities plagued by pollution-induced cancers, and the viral footage of the plastic straw being drawn painfully from a sea turtle's nostril. Ronan had to leave the room; he said he felt sick. Utopia, it seems, fell outside the scope of this film. Despite our quest for dominion, we still crave connection to the natural world. In fact, research shows that our physical and mental wellbeing depends on it. Google biophilic design, ecopsychology, or forest bathing and you'll see what I mean. Our hunger for nature is even reflected in how products are advertised to us. Merrin had a birthday recently; when I was shopping for his birthday present I found a LEGO lakeside A-frame cabin set. It bore the slogan, "Feel closer to nature as you build." Plastic toys to feel closer to nature... we have come full circle.

I've given an awfully depressing account of humanity for a Sunday morning, I know. I hope some of you are thinking, surely it isn't as bad as all that. We still lead lives full of love and joy, and every now and then we have an experience that fills us with a sense of goodness, of rightness. Moments that make us think yes, this is what it's supposed to be like. This is why we are here. I want you to think about what those moments are in your own life, and they will be different for everyone. What are the experiences that pluck the guitar string of your soul and make you say, yes, this is what is right?

I had an experience like that recently.

My family was in Red River, the ski community above Taos, NM. While my husband and sons were busy violating every safety rule at the go-cart track, I bought a ticket and rode the ski lift to the top of the mountain and hiked into the forest alone. An aspen forest is eerily uniform, but the longer I watched, the more variation I noticed. This trunk curled in a corkscrew toward the sky, this one branched at the base, this one had stem scars that looked like human eyes peering out at me. I was marveling at the parade of genetic variation, the vast array of unique individuals before me, when Ecology 101 reached up from my memory to thump me squarely between the eyes. Aspens grow in stands, and under the soil surface of a stand, the trees are linked in a complex network of lateral roots. What appears to be an aspen forest is in fact a single organism with many trunks. I tried to picture what was happening under the grass at my feet; the scope of the idea made my head hurt. What must it be like, to be an aspen? There could be no true competition within an aspen stand: more for you is more for me, and your success is my success. Nor could there be conflict: it would be as ludicrous as the right hand hating the left.

Above the soil, aspens appear to be individuals, unique and separate. But they are not. I wondered then about our own individualism. Are we truly separate, or do we simply appear to be? We certainly seek to define our edges. But evidence abounds that we, like the aspen, are bound at the root. Our laughter is contagious, and our joy, our sorrow, our rage, for better or worse. Our heartbeats and breathing can regulate the heartbeats and respiration of others. Scientists have identified mirror neurons that may be the mechanism by which we experience neurologically what someone else experiences physically, even if it doesn't happen to us. We have whole systems of nerve fibers that exist to recognize the gentle touch of others. We have an instinct to protect one another, even people we don't know. In fact, history is littered with accounts of individuals sacrificing themselves to protect the rights and safety of

complete strangers, with no promise of personal gain. When cut off from one another, whether by physical isolation or by the experienced isolation of mental illness, we fail to thrive. When I start looking for evidence, I can't stop finding it. Taken individually, none of these examples points to any consciousness altering truth. But together, they are countless fingers pointing at a moon that we have stopped trying to see: that we are all enmeshed in a web of interbeing. We are not separate. I wonder if the aspen laugh at our blindness.

On the ride down the mountain I tried to picture that thing that binds us, our common root, our oversoul, perhaps, that unquantifiable thing that crackles in the spaces between us. If I had struggled to imagine the aspen as one, I was sweating with the exertion of my current effort. That late in the afternoon, most of the seats headed up the mountain were empty, but as I struggled with reimagining human existence, a woman came riding into view. She, like me, was alone. As our seats passed each other, she smiled and waved at me as if she knew exactly who I was and was so very glad to see me. I waited for her to realize I wasn't who she thought I was, but her expression never changed. *She knows me*, I thought. *She knows what I am just starting to understand.*

I have very little patience for existential philosophy. The possibility of an afterlife, for example, holds no charms for me. I can act according to my principles without the carrot or the stick, thankyouverymuch. But this idea that we are not separate, that we have never been separate, is something I pick up and turn over in my mind every day because it demands that I make different choices. If I go to buy a shirt, for example, rational self interest says to buy the cheapest one that serves my immediate needs. But if I accept as truth that the self transcends the body and that what I do impacts everything and everyone I am connected to, if what I do to the Bangladeshi woman who sewed this shirt, I do to my own mother, I will choose differently. And so on with every choice I face. I will vote differently. I will speak differently. I will love differently. There will be no strangers. There can be no conflict, because the right hand cannot hate the left. What I do to the environment, I do to my child. How will that change my behavior? What I do to you, I do to myself. How will that inform my choices?

Eisenstein says that Western culture is experiencing crisis because the Story of Separation is starting to crumble, and the crisis is necessary to open us up to a new story. This future story he calls the Story of Reunion. I like that. It suggests that we once had hold of the truth and through some hiccup in the evolution of human consciousness, we lost it, but we can find our way back home. Perhaps this is why every major religion holds in esteem some version of the golden rule: because we once knew that what we do unto others, we do unto ourselves, because *they are us*. In the Story of Reunion, we understand and accept our places in the web of interbeing, knowing and deeply known by our neighbors, knowing and deeply connected to the earth.

If the cracks are starting to show in the Story of Separation, then hallelujah. It was never the truth. Let us wedge our hands in deep and wedge those cracks open wide. The Story of Reunion isn't an evolutionary certainty. It is a story we manifest with our actions. Love your neighbor as yourself, because he is you. Leave man vs. nature behind, because we were never separate. And what of those moments of rightness, of transcendence, those brief moments when we see clearly the new story we are trying to write? Notice them, cultivate them, share them. They are gifts of our collective unconscious, left like water tied to the trees in the desert, to aid us on our journey back.