

# Retro Review Classics

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## I. Review by **Annie Spencer**

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### **Becoming Animal: An Earthly Cosmology**

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**By:** David Abram, Vintage Books, New York, 2010

**ISBN:** 978-0-375-71369-9

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What can I say? Read this book. David Abram sets out to remind us of the many ways that we can experience the natural world around us, and it seems to me that he has succeeded extraordinarily well.

As Abram writes, the reader feels transported into the landscape that the author is walking through. As he writes, his words and phrases, his sentences and paragraphs, encourage us to reform concepts around experiences that often happen just below the surface of consciousness and are therefore ignored. Abram brings our sensual experience into focus and helps us make greater sense of it. In doing so he reminds us of the delight we can feel in belonging to this natural world. Our senses feel attended to and we feel more alive. We remember how at home we can be when just taking a small walk in a field or along a canal.

This book asks the reader to 'ruminate a range of reflective questions regarding bodies, materiality, and the language of the sciences, as well as the manner in which our words affect the ongoing life of our animal senses'. Abram challenges our beliefs around language, and suggests that the movement from oral to written language was damaging to us as a species, as it encouraged us to detach ourselves from direct experiences of the world and from trusting our own sensations, instead relying on the 'expert' opinions of others:

While persons brought up within literate culture often speak about the natural world, indigenous, oral peoples sometimes speak directly to that world, acknowledging certain animals, plants and even landforms as expressive subjects with whom they might find

themselves in conversation....

Laid out and immobilized on the flat surface, our words tend to forget that they are sustained by this windswept earth; they begin to imagine that their primary task is to provide a representation of the world.... Nonetheless, the power of language remains, first and foremost, a way of singing oneself into contact with others and with the cosmos.

We are taken on a journey through such concepts as shadow, mind, mood, depth, the speech of things, and in a lucid and poetic way our relationship with the earth is opened up and our understanding of it is increased. We are reminded over and over again of our part in the world. That we too are natural beings. This reminder, written in such a joyous way, makes this reader, at least, long to become like a snail so that she can live closer to the earth with just a small pack of shelter on her back.

But this book is far from being a paean of praise to the natural world. It is a sober and philosophical discussion about the limitations of our culture; it constantly seeks to expand our understanding of ourselves, and to open up our abilities to a broader and more satisfying experience of life day by day and minute by minute.

Talking about early development, Abram suggests that the inwardly felt sentience of the child is a correlate of the outwardly felt wakefulness of the sky and the steadfast support of the ground, and the wilfulness of the caressing wind; it is a concomitant of the animate surroundings....

And he goes on to say:

Only much later, as the child is drawn deeply into the whirling vortex of verbal language – that flood of phrases that earlier surrounded her simply as a beckoning play of melodic sounds continuous with the cries of ravens and the rumble of thunder – only then is the contemporary child liable to learn that neither the bird nor the storm are really aware....

Abram compares this mental attitude to the experience of our senses, and suggests that the 'foot, as it feels the ground pressing up against it, remembers... the ears listening, know that all things speak.... Even the eyes know this, that *everything* lives...'. At another point:

The most intimate contact between the body and the earth unfolds not just at the bottom of our feet but along the whole porous surface of our skin. For earth is not merely that dense presence underfoot – it is also the transparent air that enfolds us.

And with that, Abram draws us into a deeper relationship with the earth as he reminds us that air is not nothing, that the atmosphere which we are constantly moving about in and which we are steadily breathing in and out of our bodies 'is a subtle ocean steadily generated and rejuvenated by the diverse entities that dwell within it...'

And later:


The air is not a random bunch of gases simply drawn to earth by the earth's gravity; but an elixir generated by this world.... Perhaps we should add the letter *I* to our planet's name, and call it 'Eairth', in order to remind ourselves that the 'air' is entirely a part of the earth, and the *I*, *the I* or *self*, is *wholly immersed in that fluid element*.

There is a wonderful passage about a rather frightening encounter with sea lions that was resolved by sign language, in a chapter that explores communication from many angles and concludes that

if we no longer call out to the moon (and others)... well, then, the numerous powers of this world will no longer address us.... We become ever more forgetful in our relations with the rest of the biosphere, an obliviousness that cuts us off from ourselves, and from our deepest sources of sustenance.

It is hard to pull out quotable phrases, for Abram builds his themes through long and delicious passages that are a delight to explore just for the shivers of enjoyment and remembrance that they evoke. Yet underlying the exquisite descriptions of the natural world and the reminders of how we do belong and can interact, should we so choose, are serious explorations of the philosophies underlying our common culture, our beliefs about the nature of reality, about what forms communication can take, about ecology, biodiversity, human survival.

For psychologists pondering the possibilities of taking clients into the natural world as an aid to their healing, for those wondering how this might be achieved, this book is thought provoking and stimulating.

What can I say? Read this book. 

## II. Review by **John Rowan**

### **Free to Feel: Finding Your Way through the New Therapies**

**By:** Jerome Liss, Wildwood House, London, 1974

**ISBN:** 0-7045-0115-5

Looking at this book now, 40 years later, brings back a lot of memories for me, because I knew most of the people mentioned in it. It starts off by outlining what the author means by the 'new therapies'. He is referring to the whole roster of what we now call humanistic therapy, and it takes for granted the way in which (in 1974) it was possible to experience each of these forms of therapy in growth centres. At that time there were about six different growth centres in London; others were located in Manchester, Bath, Brighton, Edinburgh and a variety of places further afield.

A great deal of this book is devoted to feelings, and much of the rest is devoted to the body. 'The New Therapies start with the body.' We also learn about communication: 'Balance you-messages with I-messages'; 'Balancing negatives with affirmatives'; 'Replace questions with statements'; 'Be specific', and so on.

We learn about the great names of the new therapies and what they actually do: Wilhelm Reich; Alexander Lowen; Arthur Janov; Gerda Boyesen; Ida Rolf; Will Schutz; Gestalt; and the author's own therapy. Each of them spends a major part of their effort on working with the body to elicit strong emotions. To compare what is said here about Gestalt, and to read what is being written today, is to look from a portrait of great breakthrough to a scene of caution and relative narrowness. It is like looking down the wrong end of a telescope.

The emphasis which appears all through this book is on catharsis and the expression of powerful emotions, diminished throughout the period, punctuated as it was by the closing of growth centres due to complaints from neighbours about the noise. Later, of course, the increasing panic about litigation reduced the number of therapists using bodywork and catharsis.

Liss writes:

I hold patients, massage them, suggest assertive exercises like shouting, and work with body expressiveness toward an 'opening' of the body's natural gestures, and its attendant energies. An important part of this work is the 'basic contract' of who takes the initiative and where responsibility lies between

the patient and myself. I am not responsible for my patients, nor are they responsible for me. I do not take care of my patients, though I care for them. I am responsible for myself and my actions, and my patients are responsible for themselves and their actions. To my mind this means a continuous respect for freedom. Freedom revealed, acted upon, and acknowledged in a relationship of trust is a supreme experience.

This seems to me a good statement of what we thought at the time. You will note that there is nothing there about the relational approach which we think is so important today.

Then we come on to group work, and learn the 'new group principles'. Elizabeth Mintz is quoted at length. The Stanford group research is quoted approvingly, which is a pity, because it was a real mess of a project. Carl Rogers' approach is also approved, again with some reservations. Then we come on to psychodrama, with much understanding and approval, and family work. There is a rather uncritical account of Synanon.

There is an appreciative introduction to co-counselling, and a good account of the radical therapy movement led by Claude Steiner and others. This leads to a general examination of the various political movements connected with therapy. Finally, there is some account of the neurological side of things.

What is the message of this book?

Politics, of course, is the fulcrum for change. If political-me is

at odds with political-you, we've got to work it out better in the future than in the past. Humanity has always relied on force and violence when property and goods were disputed. This must change. Because humanity has spread over the earth like a cancer, a ripple of violence can spread like a shock wave. Today you and I must negotiate, so we both can win and survive.

What strikes me most now about this book is its optimism. It belongs to a time when it seemed as if the New Jerusalem was really on its way, with everything opening up. It has been said that the 1960s only came to Britain in the 1970s, but of course the 1960s was a time of increasing prosperity, while the 1970s was not. So instead of hymns to the new consciousness, we got punk music.

Sadly, this book is a paean of praise for the revolution that never was, the great breakthrough that never happened. This is a powerful book, an inspirational book, but it is about a movement which had hardly started, before it was already in decline. 📍

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**Some materials from Jerome Liss can still be found on the internet – see:**

- [www.biosistemica.org/articoli/NEC](http://www.biosistemica.org/articoli/NEC)
- [www.hakomiinstitute.com/Forum/Issue13/article2.htm](http://www.hakomiinstitute.com/Forum/Issue13/article2.htm)
- [www.eabp.org/backup/scient/scientific\\_answers\\_4.htm](http://www.eabp.org/backup/scient/scientific_answers_4.htm)



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