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Taking Root: An Unbroken Intimacy with Life

by Anne Hillman

How do we cooperate with life's gradual shaping of the human mind—its painstaking work of drawing us towards the light of greater wisdom? Life has been molding our clay since birth: drawing us, as it did our earliest ancestors, out of the dense energies of instinct, into an awareness of feeling, and then, into the mystery of thought. The call of our time bids us seek beyond a reliance on thought, alone, that we may become wise in Love.



At 4,800 years, the oldest tree in the world is a Great Basin Bristlecone Pine.

Love is not a feeling. It is a great power. Love joins us to existence by that which is deepest in us. It stands revealed as *who we really are* when we learn to live in unbroken intimacy with life. *This is the intimate relationship that matters.*

In an impassioned plea that we make manifest this breadth of kinship coded in our genes, Thomas Berry quoted a Chinese sage:

Even the frightened cry of the bird, the crushing of a plant, the shattering of a tile, or the senseless breaking of a stone immediately and spontaneously causes pain in the human heart. This would not be so *unless there exists a bond of intimacy and even identity between ourselves and these other beings.*¹

At this instant, a baby bird flies onto my windowsill not two feet away, his soft, silver down blowing in the wind like a gossamer shawl. Perched there, alert and posturing like he owns the place, he stares me straight in the eye, turning his head left and right in abrupt bursts of energy. Inquiring.

I stop to watch the tiny creature, then, realizing what I'd just written, shift gears and change the direction of what I'd planned to say. The bird's appearance is a perfect example of what I call 'punctuation,' a cue to reorient to *Presence*, to *Unity*, to *the One*—whatever you call the mysterious field in which we're most deeply rooted.

Besides meditation, I find three practices helpful for reorienting ourselves: noting punctuation, taking root, and turning our attention from thought to awareness.

Punctuation

Punctuation is how *Unity* shows itself to us, comes sailing into our everyday world and surprises us. It intersects our ordinary mindset and puts an exclamation point at the precise moment an important theme has emerged: in writing, conversation or in a fleeting thought. Slightly different from synchronicity,² it's a lived experience of being One with life that is familiar to many of us.

Punctuation becomes a bridge between inner and outer worlds when we reflect on experiences like these and ask, "What did I just write?" as a red fox pauses outside the window in broad daylight, when we're least expecting it. "What did I just say to myself?" as a deer or a bobcat suddenly appears on a trail. "What was I thinking just before that great blue heron came flying low—right over the hood of my car?"

It need not come from living things. Punctuation occurs when anything interrupts our ordinary way of thinking and exclaims "Wake up! Notice!" Words on a page, a sassy license plate, the sudden intonation of a bell.

Five huge black chimes hang from a thick branch outside my living room window. Very heavy, they tend to silence, but occasionally, when someone in a group says something deeply significant, they sound: dark, resonant tones, not really ringing, more a shimmering, hushed commentary, an ancient pentatonic chord. And everyone stops—astonished.

We sail into the arms of *Unity* when we're open, alert and inquiring like the bird; when we turn away from the digital connections that anesthetize us and are suddenly enlivened by a vibrant connection to the earth and its inhabitants—some living, and some less obviously alive, like the chimes.

But we need to connect the dots! The meanings we derive from these moments can point to patterns that transcend our own concerns and are vital to the collective. No matter the collective discounts them. Most of us have been taught to live in a narrow mental world, trapped within a logical framework that cannot access—because it hasn't questioned, tried out or experienced—

these richly layered capacities for perception in the human animal that we *are!*

We can change our minds. To note punctuation isn't 'primitive thinking.' It is awe, and awe combined with thought lends wisdom and depth of meaning to an otherwise flat perspective; multiple views of reality that honor a much larger Self.

Ideas about the Self can't speak to the deep place in our bodies where we know what is really true to our senses, our feelings, and our experience. Surely, *something* in us is wide-awake and prompts us to follow our yearning for meaning! *Something* wants to be fed.

Perhaps the soul listens; perhaps it waits... and when it hears what it needs, stirs mightily and begins to call us out of our locked places. Though moments like these make *no sense*, they speak to the interior one who watches and listens and knows that what is occurring is important. There's no cause and effect to this dimension of ourselves—only deep relatedness: an intimacy with all things long since obliterated by a Western worldview.

Intimacy

I'm stunned when I ask audiences for their associations to the word 'intimacy' and no one mentions the body. This reticence seems to show how far some of us have wandered from our natural selves. But words emerged from our bodies! They're a link to what we've left behind. The Latin root of 'intimacy' is *intimus*, meaning *innermost*, and its root is *interus* which means *inward* and *to go deeper*.

How do you come to know your innermost self? How do you go deeper? The deep self is essential to intimacy with another and with the larger life. I call it *'taking root.'*

Taking root

Tiny seedlings sprout from the living root of a giant redwood tree. They *claim the giant's root as their own*, surrender to its impetus, and grow towards the light. As I see it, the action required of *us* is to trust the great root on which *we* stand and surrender. Surrender isn't defeat. It's an inner relaxation—*into the root*.

What does this use of the word 'root' mean to *you*? *That matters.* For when you know what you rest on and relax into it, your heart opens to life's secret—its creative impetus conveyed beneath thought: an intuition, a metaphor; a new possibility, a confirming punctuation. Joy. Subtle clues like these are reminders that there is infinitely more to life—a reality we barely notice but that the body knows intimately—a wisdom *built into us because it is built into the great root* on which we live.

We're rooted in the earth. But we also need to take root in our bodies and in a group. Language again points the way. *Interus* also means *between, among, mutually*, and more subtly, *together on the inside*. The plant kingdom has long since worked out this kind of intimacy.

Recent Israeli research shows how an ordinary pea plant affected by drought not only adapts to dry conditions, but also relays its stress chemically to its neighbors through its roots, prompting *all species* of plants nearby to respond in kind. The researchers found

"these beings capable of basic learning, communication, and responsiveness through their *intimate interactions with the environment and with one another...*" Plants not yet affected stored the information, and were better able to withstand drought conditions when they occurred. They drew on memory to activate the needed response, which then created a cascading chain of stress responses in plants increasingly further away. In astonishing language, these scientists acknowledged that they found the research "incredibly difficult, since the *subjectivity of plants* is dispersed throughout their bodies, from roots to shoots to leaves."³

To live in unbroken intimacy with life—*our subjectivity—our presence*—needs to be rooted in our whole body: mind, heart and soul. Then we *under-stand*: we literally stand under who *we think* we are with an intelligence that thought alone cannot provide. Taking root in our whole selves, we're One: *together on the inside*, deeply connected to life and to all being.

Taking root in the body

How do you come into your own presence?

We make this intimate connection conscious by honoring what has *not* been civilized in us. It changes our identity. Berry said that if we are to survive, humanity must reinvent itself at the species level. And he reminded us that genuine transformation of identity takes place *at our core*:

A new descent into a more primitive state must come about... We must reach far back into the genetic foundations... to the shamanic dimension of the psyche itself.⁴

Possibilities for deep change lie in origins, like the amazing potential in stem cells. These 'original cells' can transform into whatever kind of cell is needed by the body. The same creative potential lies in the shaman's 'original mind.' Deeply connected to spirit and to the animal kingdom, he 'walks between the worlds,'⁵ a healer of mind, body and circumstance. We access that primeval dimension of psyche through our wild and animal bodies.

The title of *The Dancing Animal Woman* came from a short dream:

*I was dancing in the forest, bare to the waist, my legs those of a hooved animal, long and hairy, and over my face a thick wooden mask, painted with geometric designs.*⁶

You don't have to be a psychologist to understand it. The dream vividly shows *who we are* beneath what modern cultures—and education and religion as their expressions—have done to our wild and holy selves. We turn away from the 'geometric designs' to unmask the reality behind all our symbols: the ancient bond between the wild and the sacred, between what is wild and the cosmos.

Rooted in our bodies, we engage a subtle capacity for attunement to the energetic field. Far more refined than seeing, hearing, or smelling, it is a feeling/sensation of belonging to life that goes back to our human beginnings. Berry noted that our ancestors in the wild used a 'different kind of perception.' They listened to

what the aboriginals call their songline—their soul path into the unknown. He expressed it in terms of energy:

In the late Paleolithic... and the Neolithic periods, we all lived in an ocean of energy. Physical and psychic forms of energy were intimately related... There is a significant difference between physical energy and psychic energy. Physical energy is diminished by use... Psychic energies are increased by... the numbers of those who participate in their activity.⁷

Taking root in the group

How do you come into the presence of others?

Since these energetic sympathies increase with the numbers of participants, our task today is to make them conscious—as a group. If our species' greatest challenge is to live as one among many on this planet, the necessary spiritual work for each member is to take root in the group as *We*, not I—what Berry meant by 'reinventing ourselves.'

Members of intentional groups (groups that meet for these purposes regularly or in a retreat) soon discover their minds are joined, that we're all subjects among subjects, and can become exquisitely sensitive group members attuned to its changing energetic qualities. We eventually *feel it physically*. Greatly amplified in a group, it is an experience of the kind of Love that unites differences. This shared awareness helps us to align our actions with the movement of the One. It is the beginning of wisdom.

Wisdom is Love made visceral.⁸

Turning attention from thought to awareness

How do you come into the awareness of Presence?

Depth perception. Taking root in Presence is a deepening of perception: We sense into a person, a group or a situation by turning our attention from thought to awareness (really the awareness of Presence) and abide in it. We 'listen' to that field with our entire bodies, as the group. Since people have different learning styles, there are many ways to practice this shift of attention. Much of the work of becoming conscious starts with awareness of sensation, so I'll ask: "What does it *feel like* when you come into your own presence?" "What does it *feel like* in your body when you shift attention from thought to awareness?"

In an instant, you can feel the group 'drop in.'

An unbroken intimacy with life

But we have a broader goal. Our challenge is to 'walk between the worlds.' To move easily between intellect and awareness so they may work together. On retreat, we use inner gestures to anchor us in the awareness of Presence while we're listening to someone speak. This quality of attention is the most important gift we can give to another.

It takes practice to walk like the shaman. To stay aware, we'll note when attention to the awareness of Presence dissipates. I might

ring a faint chime when the group 'drops out.' Or a participant later tells us what it was like for her when the group's attention to awareness waned: "I suddenly felt alone. I'd lost the safe container, the group's presence." So we take root again, turn our attention from thought to awareness, and listen to the One—as One. This is the tender connection.

The tender connection

The tender connection with the unity of all things is a subtle meeting place between psyche and nature, a threshold where we experience the elusive sensitivity and embedded wisdom that comes with being embodied. When we let our attention slide down from our heads and drop deep into the round, pulsing cave of our interior bodies, we're no longer lonely; we belong the way the baby bird belongs, the way a redwood seedling, a pea plant or a river belongs. Like a child tracing a finger along the single edge of a Moebius strip, we see: Inside and outside aren't divided. They are One.

Inhabiting the body at this depth is living at the quick. The more we tune to our core, the more our boundaries widen and melt. We begin to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves. We let go our hold on what we *think* we know and tremble as the energy of the unknown rises within us. We stumble on the lair of a wild creature in our bowels. Our kinship with the grasses and hills grows, and beasts of the forest and soaring birds of prey acknowledge their counterpart in us. The whole world enters as if through our pores, shining threads of light spun across chasms of separateness.

Love

Love coheres. It is an energy that unites. Love joins us to the mysterious dimension of the One. This intimate communion leaves us wide open and exquisitely sensitive to Presence—inside, outside and between. Inquiring, listening and radically alive, we walk between the worlds together, hoping to serve the whole.

Endnotes

¹Fifteenth-century Chinese sage, Wang Yang-Ming in Thomas Berry, "The Spirituality of the Earth," quoted in Charles Birch, William Eaken, and Jay B. McDaniel (eds.) *Liberating Life*, 1990, pp. 151-158. ²Punctuation is instantaneous and therefore, a little different from synchronicity, which tends to be less time-bound and can occur at longer intervals. ³Michael Marder, "If Peas Can Talk, Should We Eat Them?" N.Y. Times Opinionator, April 28, 2012. (Italics mine). For the original research see: <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0023625> ⁴Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 1988. Condensed from pages 201, 210-212. ⁵Michael Harner, PhD, anthropologist, and founder of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies. ⁶Anne Hillman, *The Dancing Animal Woman—A Celebration of Life*, 1994, p. 93. The myth of the centaur in human history symbolizes the same truth. I searched for the female centaur in literature without success, but years later, found some on a Victorian table at an inn in Butte, Montana. Its four legs were carved figures of naked women with deer-like legs and cloven hooves. ⁷Thomas Berry, *The Great Work*, pp. 167-171, condensed in Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love—Discovering Fire for the Second Time*, 2008, pp. 260-261. (Italics mine). ⁸ Thanks to Michelle Levey, PhD for this elegant phrase.

Teilhard's biographer cites Anne Hillman's Awakening the Energies of Love: "a pioneering work . . . extraordinary inspiration for learning to love in new ways." Brian Swimme calls it "an experiential pathway into that necessary transformation." Her retreats are inclusive and offer experiences of the kind of love that unites differences. <http://www.annehillman.net>

