

A couple of weeks ago I was trail running through the woods with my dog in the Cochran Shoals section of the Chattahoochee River Natural Recreation Area. I like to run in the morning and for me to get to the trail without having to fight a lot of traffic, I leave early. I'm usually out of the house by 6:30 AM and at the trailhead by 6:45 AM.

This time of year, it's still very dark at 6:45 AM so I must run with a headlamp. My dog usually runs right behind me and although sometimes he veers off the trail to chase a squirrel or some other critter, he usually stays fairly close to me.

Well, we were running together in the dark and I notice he's not behind me and I can't hear him. I stop, look around in the darkness and I soon see the light of my headlamp reflect off his eyes. He's off the trail in the brush about 50 feet away and he's looking at me. I say, "Hey, c'mon let's go." I hear him rustling through the leaves and within five seconds he's at my side....Yet off the trail, in the darkness and in the brush 50 feet away, the pair of eyes are still looking at me.

It could have been a *Blair Witch Project*, *Silence of the Lambs* kind of moment yet even surprising to myself, I kind of shrugged it off and kept going. Three years ago, when I first started running trails in the darkness, I think I would have reacted differently; but I've now gotten used to it. These woods, even in darkness, have a kind of feel to them, a comforting familiarity that has grown on me over time.

Can the woods have a feel to them? Can the woods be regarded as a sentient being in its own right? In our time for all ages story today, the sentience of the Salish Sea is personified as conscious entities.

Have we considered other entities as being sentient? How about germs and bacteria? Could they be called sentient beings? We might think of sneezing as simply a way the body has evolved to rid itself of unwanted germs, bacteria, viruses, etc. It's a way the body protects itself. But have we ever thought about sneezing from the germ's perspective? No? Think about it. What does the germ want? It wants a cozy home; a place where it can be fed, grow and reproduce. When things reproduce, to make more room for offspring, they spread; claim new territory. Germs too want to spread. And sneezing might simply be a perfect mass-delivery system for spreading germs. Instead of us evolving to eliminate

germs by sneezing, maybe we've evolved as a mass-delivery system simply to help germs expand into new environments.

Author and herbalist Stephen Harrod Buhner writes:

Unfortunately, medical researchers' beliefs about bacteria were very wrong. Researchers said it would take roughly a million years for bacteria to develop widespread resistance to antibiotics through spontaneous mutations. They assumed bacteria were stupid when in reality bacteria are highly sentient. They communicate by means of a sophisticated language - as sophisticated as ours. They recognize their kin. They protect their offspring. They create chemicals designed to product specific outcomes in living systems, which certainly fits any definition of toolmaking (Stephen Harrod Buhner, *The Sun*, December 2014, p6).

Here's the point I'm trying to make: Who's really in charge here?

Often, we hear us humans say that we can save the Earth. But again, who's really in charge here? Who knows, maybe Nature is trying to save us. Maybe Nature, with its storms, hurricanes and wildfires is telling us something; more than that, maybe these are the tough love, the bitter prescriptions that we must swallow save us from extinction.

You've likely heard it said that Nature has a mind of her own...but have you ever thought of this being literally true? Have you ever thought of Nature, or the things that comprise Nature as having some sort of consciousness?

Before you file this away in the crackpot category you may want to consider a few things. Philosophers since the beginning have time have explored questions such as, "What is consciousness? What is mind? What is thought? How do we know what we know?" You don't have explore these questions too deeply to realize the slippery slope we're on regarding their possible answers.

Panpsychism is the idea that everything material, no matter how small, has an element of consciousness. That consciousness need not be identical to yours; that consciousness is no doubt different.

Crackpot idea? Again, philosophers since the beginning of time have considered this. Plato, in the *Timeaus* says that individual stars are “living creatures (40b),” and that the creator of the Universe “...divided it into souls equal in number to the stars, and each...soul He assigned to one star (41d).”

In the twentieth century Josiah Royce, who taught philosophy for over thirty years at Harvard, also supported panpsychism. He writes:

[W]e have no sort of right to speak in any way as if the inner experience behind any fact of nature were of a grade lower than ours, or less conscious, or less rational.... [T]his reality is, like that of our own experience, conscious, organic, full of clear contrasts, rational, definite. We ought not to speak of dead nature (Josiah Royce, *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy*, 1898/1915: 230).

My point here is not to convince you that panpsychism is true. My point is that the idea of panpsychism might not be as far-fetched as you think.

In her early twenties, journalist Claire Thompson did something entirely out of character. She took a job with the National Forest Service working in the woods clearing dead trees, brush, etc. This work involved daily cuts, blisters, bruises and exhaustion; and it involved tent camping in the wild for weeks and months at a time.

There’s a certain machismo; a certain “you better keep up” and “you better pull your weight” to this work; and she was a green as they come. It was difficult work and she felt alone and vulnerable...unprotected. And then, on top of that, at the end of each day, as darkness would fall, she had to face her innate fear of the dark, fear of the wild, in the solitude of her tent.

At first, she had trouble sleeping. She’d lie awake in her sleeping bag waiting for dawn. I’ve been there too. At the end of a wonderful day of hiking or backpacking, night falls and I’m alone in the solitude of my tent....and often I’d lie awake in my bag waiting for dawn.

But as Claire Thompson’s time in the wild turned from days to weeks and then from weeks to months, her relationship with the wild began to turn too. It wasn’t

anything she consciously did. It wasn't anything she intended. It's just something that happened.

The things that used to scare me, or at least feed my unease - the darkness pressing in on a moonless night, unexplained rustlings outside my tent, the unshakeable sense of something formless but sentient surrounding me - became almost reassuring in their constancy, their mystery less sinister.

Moments by myself at night [in the wilderness] felt like a secret ritual, a prayer, something invaluable that belonged just to me. They were my refuge from an outside world that had no time for such reflection, a world lacking in mystery but abundant in menace. More and more, the consciousness of the forest seemed to be not watching but watching over me. (Claire Thompson, *Parabola*, Summer 2019, p95).

On those moonless nights, she had no doubt been forced to reflect upon her innate fear of and unease with the wild darkness pressing in on her. And she experienced a transformation - the darkness of the forest became a conscious, sentient and loving caregiver. Imagine that! Like the woman who married the sea...

...when the young men take their canoes through that narrow channel, if they think of her, their canoes go swiftly through, always avoiding the whirlpools. They say sometimes that they see her long dark hair floating on the surface of the water (Kathryn Dudding, *The Woman Who Married the Sea*)."

Claire Thompson describes the forest transforming, changing from disembodied threatening menace to conscious, loving caregiver. Let's not forget – the forest, with its wild darkness didn't change, she did.

Again, I'm not trying to convince you that panpsychism is true. However, the pragmatic question is: if you considered the idea that if Nature, and all its inhabitants, and all of which it is comprised, have some type of mind, some type of consciousness, would it cause you to live your life differently? Might it cause

you to live more gently? Might it cause you to live with more appreciation and gratitude? Might it cause you to realize and respect the wonder of it all, the preciousness of it all? How might you care for a thing such as this?

Can we “save the earth” with initiatives and ten-point plans? I don’t think we can. I don’t believe we can save anything or solve anything without first having a relationship. That’s why we do Family Promise. That’s why we participate in the IRC Thanksgiving Dinner. The relationships we create with the Family Promise guests and the IRC refugees change and reorient us more than any way we might change them with our help. Randy Blasch is attending seminary. What is the first thing they ask him to do as a seminarian? They tell him to go back into his community and build relationships with a marginalized group. He is working and building relationships with undocumented students at Freedom University each week. And I can guarantee that he will be changed and reoriented more than any way he might change them with his help.

We can’t save the earth until we have a relationship with the wild, until we listen to what Nature is trying to tell us. We need to be reoriented from the inside out so that all our actions, all that we do, will be harmonious with the interconnected web of all existence of which we are a part.

We start with relationship - and relationship is best started by listening. May we listen deeply. May we listen well.