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Into the Blue

Chasing the Spirit of David Bohm



Lee Nichol

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ONE

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THE ORDER OF THINGS

Most of us are able to remember fairly far back into our childhood. It may be rather spotty the further back we go, but certain memories are simply there, and available. And if we pursue this a bit, we are likely to find a “do not pass” point, beyond which we can’t recall anything further. That point, by definition, would be our earliest memory.

In my earliest memory I am three or four years old. I am standing outside my grandparents’ house in rural Tennessee, looking out beyond a fence, into an empty field and a wide blue sky. Within the memory, there is a direct, simple feeling of sensing the world, of being conscious, of having a few distinct thoughts and feelings. I remember thinking-feeling that the field and the sky were very different from the family gathering going on in the house.

But I am not yet “Lee.” Of, course, at three or four years old I turn and look if that name is called. That kind of association is fully in place. But any sense of mature self-concept is still quite a long way off. The crystallized, firmly-set “me” – the inner mirroring by which I steadily review myself and check in on myself – that does not yet exist.

Nonetheless, I am fully alive. I sense and feel and think intensely. The field and the sky are immense and mysterious,

and yet so near as to be palpable and physically intimate. There is no romanticism in this, nothing about the “innocence of childhood.” It is simply a description of what has persisted in the memory: a distinct sense of immediate aliveness – of being conscious, and of being embodied. I am here. I exist.

Over time, over months and then years, a more fully-formed sense of “Lee” emerges, a bit here, a bit there. Conceptual and emotional structurings become more and more entwined with the idea, “Lee.” Some of this entwinement comes from experience with the sheerly sensory world, though most of it comes from the surround of family, friends, school, society. Idiosyncratic variants of this occur to all of us. The pathways by which I became “Lee” are not the same pathways by which my wife became “Eva” – but the process is the same. At first hazy and vague, then increasingly precise and well-formed, I emerge from vast swathes of sensing and knowing, as a distinct being: I am here. I exist. *I am Lee.*

This is surely a kind of magic, this emergence of an I, of a specific self, of a “me.” There is now the capacity to reflect myself to myself, to form sustained images of myself – and to realize that this is also happening in others. By and large, though, we miss the magic of it, partly because the emergence is gradual, like a slow, fine mist, and partly because it happens to everybody. It is so commonplace that it becomes unremarkable. Like so many other things, it recedes into the background of our conscious awareness, becoming a “given.” But if we reflect on this development, ongoing at this very moment throughout the human world, it surely must count as a staggering feat of evolution.

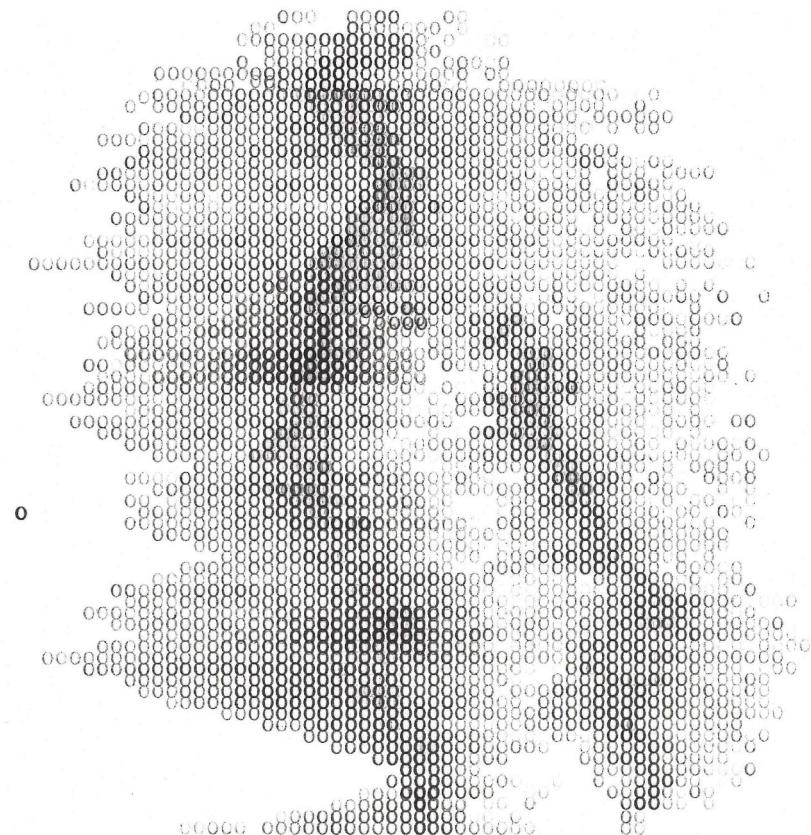
It is an extraordinary thing, if we recognize its strange beauty: I am here. I exist. I am Lee. And as this process unfolds, every other thing acquires an identity as well, precise and exact: a cat is a cat, a tree is a tree, my mother is Mom, a stone is a stone, the stars are the stars. A world of precise *things* emerges, and I am one of them. From the proliferation of such designations, I join the collective understandings of what is real and significant and true, and form my own versions of how to function within this well-defined “system of the world.”

Roughly correlate to this crystallization of Lee and world, there is a diminishment of those boundless expanses of sensing and knowing that coursed through the being, the organism, that was there before Lee emerged. The more clearly and sharply Lee and the world come into focus, the more the innate, expansive knowings recede. For most of us, the fecundity of those earlier times become a distant memory, and that alone – a memory.

But that earlier state – that *open organism* that senses the forces and patterns of creation – that being hasn’t gone anywhere. It is here, now – but it is largely overwhelmed by the demands and definitions of the system of the world. Nonetheless, it is with each of us, latent yet available. It has its own kind of consciousness, its own kind of intelligence, which is broader, richer, and more open than that of the sharply defined Lee-and-world. But this originary knowing is not simply “physical instinct.” Nor is it an insubstantial “consciousness,” or a disembodied “intelligence,” or a sheerly abstract “soul.” It partakes of our physicality in very intimate ways, while naturally participating in movements and energy patterns and

knowings well beyond the physical body. It seems to emit a certain kind of warmth, a subtle luminosity. It carries the perfume of something very old and strange. Somewhere, deep within, we can sense this.

The underlying cultural narrative is that this original open organism simply *becomes Lee* – that the organism (“body,” in the cultural telling) evolves and merges into the developing “Lee.” And while there is a relation between that open organism and Lee as self-image, they are far from identical. “Lee” has emerged from the matrix of that original open organism.



Maria Hvidbak, 2022

The open organism is primary, comes first, and the constitution of Lee follows. This is the case historically – as evidenced by that earliest memory – but it is also happening now, in each moment. Lee is perpetually emerging from the unknown matrix of the open organism.

That emergence can be sensed, felt, and known directly. It is quite common to get a glimpse of this in the transition from sleeping to waking – a peripheral knowing that experience is being crystallized as we become fully awake, and that we are leaving behind something more than just the dream-detritus of daily life. By many accounts, a similar unfolding occurs in deep states of meditation – immersion in a state of profound stillness, then a gradual emergence from that state, and finally a return to discursive self-consciousness. An emotional shock, such as the death of a loved one, can jolt us out of our sense of self, and into an “in-between” which may be disorienting, but can also reveal true silence, from which we return differently. Some people find themselves in an in-between by way of psychotropics, and can clearly sense a transition to the normal self-world as the effects of the drug fade away. In these and other experiences we may find ourselves in the moment before Lee is fully Lee, in the space from which Lee becomes Lee. In those in-betweens, there is the opportunity to directly encounter the organic openness that our daily “self” is arising from.

One of the primary indicators that Lee-as-self-image has emerged, and eclipsed the presence of the open organism, is the dense proliferation of associative thought, in which one thought leads to another, then another, then another – often

unrelated, and often with multiple unfinished thoughts co-existing at once. This kind of thought is typically entwined with story-thought, in which I spin story after story, large and small, about who I am and what is happening to me. In turn, story-thought relies on recycled memory-thoughts. And all these interpenetrate the undergirding conceptual thought that gives rise to the self-image in the first place. By contrast, the open organism, while certainly capable of various modes of thought, calls on them sparingly. That ever-present originary being uses modes other than discursive, associative, and narrative thought to apprehend its world. But these other modes remain largely inaccessible when the self-image and its thought-patterns shine too brightly.

In speaking about the “open organism,” it is all too easy to lose sight of the fact that *the open being is not an object*. It is neither metaphorical, nor literal. It is neither subject, nor object. We really have no category in which to place “it.” In language, and in analysis, we can objectify it, but is closer to us than we are to ourselves. It is an immediate living presence. When we talk about it, it tends to form in our experience with a noun-like quality, a “thing.” When we sense it, it forms in our experience in a verb-like way – as movement, as flux, deeper and stranger than what we normally think of as subjectivity.

We need both. We need to talk about it, and we need to sense it. Otherwise it remains part of the unspoken cultural narrative, the one that says that the original open organism *becomes* Lee. “It” remains largely hidden from experience, subsumed in the self-image. We can start undoing that narrative – both within us, and more broadly – by talking

about the original open organism, that living mystery, that presence that many of us feel and sense, which is there before Lee-as-self-image emerges in each moment.

We also need to feel our way into its actuality – beyond word and thought, into the deep life of it, into its immediacy, into its qualitative infinity. This organismic presence will never manifest in any significant way unless we open to it, gesture toward it, imagine it, get our hands dirty feeling our way into it. It is bit like courting, with all that is involved in that.

When I do begin to go that further bit – beyond talk, words, and thought – I find that the cultural narrative is not the only thing that inhibits opening to the openness. The intensity of the ever-present open organism, the startling immediacy of it, its vast unfamiliarity – all of this conspires to deflect me, even when I incline toward it. Like courting, it can be tantalizing, and it can be frightening. It beckons to us, and it unsettles us. There are those who say we have no business going there, opening the unknown, “where angels fear to tread.” In many respects, the deck is stacked against reorienting toward this taproot of our being.

But whether we are or aren’t deterred, whether or not we incline toward some access to this strange beingness, there is a second civilizational dictum, even more potent than the first one. In a massive, pan-human sleight-of-hand, this meta-narrative assures that the mystery of original beingness rarely intrudes upon our daily life. It leads to nothing less than a complete inversion of the true order of our existence.

The dictum is this: *I am the owner of “my” experience. I am the owner of “my” body.*

I implicitly claim ownership of that which I have emerged from. I claim ownership of that which birthed me. In this way, that which is primary, that which is the source of my very existence, is rendered definable, controllable, placable. It becomes a kind of property.

I, Lee, have a body

I, Lee, have thoughts

I, Lee, have feelings

I, Lee, have consciousness

My body

My consciousness

Like every other human being, I tacitly ingest the cultural concepts that *I am the source and owner of my consciousness*, and *I am the possessor of my body*. And like the emergence of the self-image, of “Lee,” these assumptions seem so natural, so self-evident, as to be literally un-remarkable. They do not warrant remarking on. In this way, the unexamined concepts simply become reality.

The deep irony here is that the capacity to mirror myself back to myself, to create the image of Lee in the first place – that great evolutionary feat of self-reflection has been negated, put to sleep, when it comes to mirroring the natural order of things. This quintessential quality of “evolved humans” is utterly failing us in apprehending how we have subverted the order of that which comes “first,” and that which comes “next.” To reflect on the veracity of these concepts – *I am the source of my consciousness* and *I am the possessor of my body* – such reflection has no standing or support in contemporary culture. It is as if the initial magic of self-creation has now become a curse, caught in its own spell, unable to understand how things have come to be. At the individual level, as David Bohm has pointed out, this is delusion. Writ large, it is cultural collusion.

This neutering of our reflective capacity results in a two-fold dilemma. It places the self-image in a deeply confused relationship with the open organic being; this original beingness, when not totally eclipsed, is reduced to a function of the self-image, a function of “Lee.” Lee now becomes the source of all experience – and the primordial being, if sensed at all, is felt to *arise from me*.

At the same time, this disoriented situating of the self-image automatically sets into relief the thought patterning that constitutes the self-image: it elevates the significance of conceptual thought, associative thought, and Lee-story-memory-thought. These thoughts become very bright indeed, at the expense of the different orders of knowing and sensing that are innate to the open organism.

These two aspects – the subversion of the natural order by establishing the self-image as primary reference, and the dense proliferation of multiple forms of thought – converge to form a tightly closed loop of experience, that is, the Lee-self-world view. We hear much these days about “echo chambers,” often in reference to political messaging, indicating that we only listen to that which reinforces our political view. The same self-reinforcing dynamic is in place for the vast majority of social media, irrespective of topic. But running much deeper than either of these, there is the *ur*-echo chamber – that is, the first one – the echo chamber of the self-world image and the thought patterns that sustain it.

It takes only a bit of consideration to then see the full circle – that our digital echo chambers serve primarily to reinforce and amplify the more fundamental echo chamber of self-world-thought-image. We have unwittingly created a cultural milieu in which narcissism is normalized, automated, and digitally distributed – a built-in feature of the algorithmic patterns of our devices, our black mirrors, and now our consciousness itself.

However challenging it might once have been to apprehend and reorient the inversion of “Lee” and originary organism – to recover the “right place” for Lee to exist – it is well-nigh impossible to do so in our current time. Our addiction to digital media has reduced our attention spans to infantile levels, leaving us largely incapable of penetrating the thicket of distraction and nonsense we are immersed in, much less penetrating yet deeper into the pre-conscious conditioning of self-world-thought-image, of “Lee-and-his-world.”

And yet, something in us still flickers. From time to time, like a jolt of fresh oxygen, we sense the depth of ourselves, the mystery and strangeness of our being, a quick flash of something long forgotten. In that flash, we may sense the age-old currents of seas and stones, of the Sun, of human joy and sorrow, of birth and of death, of the inexplicable warmth we feel for other human beings, for other creatures, for the Earth.

That flash, that flickering, is a remembering. If we remember, we can reorient. We can, if we are so inclined, turn toward what that remembering arises from. This remembering has been arising in human beings for millennia upon millennia. In Indian culture, *yoga*: yoking back, rejoining consciousness to its source. In Islamic culture, *ta’wil*: to return to the inner depths of spiritual meaning. In the Christian West, *apokatastasis*: restoration to God. In ancient Greek culture, *epistrophe*: remembering and return to the divine.

In this current exploration, inspired by the spirit of David Bohm's metaphysics, it is by way of our primordial organic nature – *the open organism* – that we can remember, reorient, return. We can, if we choose, take up that most ancient of journeys – the journey of return to creation itself, to the ever-present order of things. The open organism is there, waiting, as it has always been. Turning toward it is not fantasy, or romanticism, or pious duty. It is an act of love.