

An Artist's Way of Knowing

An edited transcript of a presentation given by Peter London in September 2006 at Schumacher College, Devon, England. Based on his course: 'Drawing Closer to Nature'

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Peter London at Schumacher College, photo: Jan van Boeckel

Most people look to me and my companions as artists, as relief from the world, as charmers, entertainers, and decorators of the surface aspects of our life. When it comes to the serious things of remaking the world, we turn to more serious folks: the scientists, and the businessmen and the politicians, who really have their feet on the ground; people who really know what is true and what is possible and what is correct. It is not particularly an enjoyable position to be a fool. Most people are entertained and are mostly pleased by such antics, but of course that is such a weakened and defamed and shallow use of our talents, and use of our genius, and use of our skills,

and use of our way of knowing. One of the reasons that I enjoy being here at Schumacher is to try to renew our idea of what the artist in fact can actually bring to this great task of our planet; to see the world anew, and to see it for what it actually is. To perceive the patterns that interpenetrate ourselves with the rest of the cosmos, and to act with that more patterned, more interdependent, more luminous way of fabricating a life in a world that is similarly fabricated. That is the real worth of the community of artists to their society, and that seems like something that the community here at Schumacher is sensitive to, or at least interested in finding out more about.

That's my theme of this evening talk; "The artists' way of knowing and how that may contribute to the great task at hand." I think it is that task that brings you all here. We all feel it; the pathos of the earth whose liveliness has been damaged by our presence. And to help see past old ways for new possibilities. That is exactly what artists are about and can do: see passed old and insufficient patterns, and through imaginative skills, see the possibility of the new.

In the class that I have the wonderful privilege of conducting here called Art and the Land, I invited an assignment this morning which eventuated in a piece of one of our participants, that I would like her to speak to in just a moment. The invitation was this: Take an account of the inner talents and powers and strengths that you take yourself as being gifted by. Make a survey of that in your own mind's eye. And being guided by those forces, those generative forces, create a work that would give form, a natural form, to what those gifts and talents may look like. That is, the person you now see before you, ME has, all those distinctive talents and gifts contained within my biological self. But none of those gifts are apparent from the outside and none of my outside topography has been of my own choosing or creation. (Except of course what I am wearing, but this is not the biological topography I am referring to here.). And so the idea behind this invitation for the people in my class to create a piece of art was this: If the forces that you now find yourself consisting of, your special talents and gifts, could create a form that you would assume, perhaps something other than the form you presently come in, what form might that take? That was the invitation to the group.

One of the people in the class wrote something about her vision and it was full of the particular passion she felt in common with an oak tree, and as she drew her piece, she described the experience as one of "tumbling out." Not self consciously drawing an oak tree, but so closely did she feel aligned with it that her imagery just tumbled out.

I would categorize that way of knowing as deep empathic regard for the "other," so deep that her separate identity seemingly melted away and she became the pathos, the passion, of the oak. That way of knowing is the basis of Arne Naess' understandings of deep ecology, whose basic

premise is that unless one feels for in a deep and personal connection, the concern for the welfare of the other, who ever, and what ever that other is, the necessary reallocation of resources that it is going to take for a better way of living will not be made. It has to be at that profound level.

Let me introduce in another way, what this idea of alternative ways of knowing, investigating the world, sufficient to actually change the accord with which we live in the world. Most of what I know and therefore how I steer through life has been told to me, or read to me, and I had no personal, with which I had no primary experience. For example: amino acids and proteins are supposedly popping and oozing within me. And I have to tell you the truth: I have never seen an amino acid or a protein pop or ooze, or at rest. But I take what scientists tell me as so, and I conduct my life accordingly. I have been told, and you probably know it too, that the universe is between 14 and 16 billion years old. What can I say but Wow! That seems awfully old! Do I have any direct experience of a 14 billion year old anything? I don't even know what billion means, really. I have never seen a billion of anything. Have you? We take the word "million" and "billion", "billions of years" as our ancestry as such and somehow that is so for us and somehow our institutions are constructed on those ideas. I was thinking also the other day about the speed of light, 186,000 miles a second. That seems awfully fast! I wonder how they got that figure. I mean, it is so fast! One guy over here with a flashlight, or maybe a laser, and another person... But how do you stand 186,000 miles away? Well, OK, you stand even a 100,000 miles away. So half the distance and you multiply it by 9.2 or something. But 100,000 miles away? Well, you can't! So let's see you have to do it in circles, well it got me so dizzy, but I go back to the 186,000 miles per second. That's what they say, that's OK, and that's what it is. It seems like an awful lot to me though. Well, there are lots of other things like that that I have to and do take on face value. I don't want to sound like a complete nincompoop, but everybody tells me, that the world is round. Well, it's spherical. But to tell you the truth, I think it is just bumpy. I don't feel the roundness of the thing. I experience bumps. Being bumpy, granulated, this and that. It doesn't look quite flat. But it sure as hell doesn't look round either.

Nonetheless I operate on the basis that it is round. So when I fly in plane, I know it is coming round the corner. So I have faith in that. As the plane takes off, I don't even know how jet engines work. And I put my life in the hands of a thing that I don't know how it works, and my children's life, and even worse my grandchildren's life. They fly too! Well, lots and lots of things I am told are true I take to be true as every other seemingly sane person does, and as it turns out, just about everything that I steer by I've only been told, and only a tiny fraction of everything that I am and believe and do and cherish comes to me in this second-hand kind of way. Well, most of it seems right, most of it seems good, and in fact I get to where I want to go and I am really supported by the trains, the trusses, the airports and the airplanes, none of which I have the slightest idea of how they work or if what they say about these things is really true.

So, what's the problem? Well, the problem is this: if everything we have been told is indeed so, and true, and only so and really true, how the hell did we get in the mess that we are in where the very systems and structures that were based upon those truths, now appear to be in imminent danger of collapse, because they now seem not sufficiently true. Like some bridges, and economies and political systems, and agriculture, and water systems and and and.

With each new scientific breakthrough, there is a need to revise existing the textbooks on the matter. It makes me feel queasy when I learn, again second hand, that the truths that seemed so certain, and upon which the policies and the fabric of how we live are so firmly constructed, keep being replaced by new truths equally firmly pronounced.

Now I know that truths are constantly being revised in the direction of more refined and accurate truths, but in the mean time, I have a growing sense of provisionality to all things as they now are presented to me. Well, what's the alternative to all of this? Well, you can see the drift of my conversation: it is in this direction. That in addition to second-hand and tertiary evidence, I must use, with whatever I have, of my own sensory acumen, I must somehow find a way to break through all of those other conceptions of the world, what seems to be true, what seems to be good, and for me personally to find what is, or

might be true and to do so by somehow making contact with the raw world itself. Somehow I must find a way to take that first hand news as seriously, and as deeply, as the second hand news that I get from other sources. It's the only news that I find that I can enduringly trust or at least trust sufficiently, to redirect my life in a new way. These attempts to lift the encompassing veil of hand me down truths- as compelling as they seem, as impeccable as their sources appear to be, these attempts to see the world directly and to render the personal encounters with fidelity, conform exactly to the ways of investigating, comprehending and representing of an artist. I want to call an artist a kind of person who has the temerity to step outside the conventional truths and patterns and to have a raw engagement with the world as it comes to them. Then, to wrestle with those experiences to the point of forming them into some significant and convincingly expression.

If most everything that I know and come to believe true and good derives from second hand sources, when a discrepancy arises between what I personally experience and my received truths, my efforts to steer my little ship of state becomes hesitant and uncertain, I become anxious, my behaviour lacks the grace that confidence brings. When, however, the news from my first-hand account of encountering the world is in accord the view from outside, the combined and congruent "news," provides me with a sufficient body of information with which to efficiently and effectively allocate my resources accordingly. I believe this is true for most people as well.

The necessity of the congruence of first hand and second hand news being the sufficient tipping point for behavioural change, the Deep Ecology movement is not going to be successful, in establishing significant shifts in human behaviour in new, ecologically sustainable directions unless it provides opportunity for people to attend to better information, but to also situate themselves in the world in such a way that they can experientially, empathically, deeply experience the world and themselves as a family whose fate is inextricably entwined. This seems to me an important admonition to the movement as a whole, as we pronounce what we think are our truths. But it also seems to me an admonition to the teachers of Deep Ecology, to also employ this

holistic way; personal and a referential ways of knowing, require personal and referential ways of teaching.

If so much of what I take to be true and good, [and untrue and bad and everything in between] comes from without, and I adjust my own behaviours accordingly, from what source can I begin to cultivate inwardness and direct contacts with the world and try as best as I can with my on-board equipment, to render some sense of all that? As an artist I do that; I cultivate inwardness in the solitude of my studio. In this confined space and time, I can have experiences, experiment with possibilities, make various meanings of these sensations, and act on them to see their implications in the real- albeit circumscribed - world. The arena of my studio arena is one of the few places in the world in which I can actually act out in the manifest world, my singular experiences, intuitions, and reveries. Alone – for only moments – but extremely significant moments – from the truths and expectations of other people: my children, my grandchildren, my wife, my sister, my brother, my this, my that, I am hesitant to disrupt the momentum of beliefs and accepted norm of behaviours everyone seems to have accepted as good and true. Therefore, the preciousness of my studio space and time, where I can inhabit a tiny microclimate, a wee ecosystem in which I am the main determinant.

Now, if my musings, experiments, analyses, and intuitions arrive at different points of view from prevailing ones, and my conclusions and subsequent behaviours involve only a small circle around me, I act upon my existentially derived conclusions with relative ease. If, however, my actions will involve ever increasing circles, I need, and seek affirmation from other sources. For, as my newly arrived at behaviours inflict themselves on ever widening circles of others, I have to act a more judiciously, therefore I seek more broadly and deeply for information that might confirm or deny the truths I have personally arrived at.

A central tenet of my argument is that there are a number of ways of knowing, something everyone seems to know, but few teachers seem to employ in their classrooms. And, what every clinical psychologist knows all too well, is that the “knowing” necessary to actually bring about new behaviour requires existential,

primary, contactfulness with that portion of the world that is at issue. Otherwise people may become more informed, even clever, but no change in behaviour will be forthcoming. We are a most schooled people. But I think it fair to say that we are not a hell of lot wiser. Many reasons are put forward to this nagging problem, the one that I am proposing is the overwhelming preponderance of secondary sources and the near absence of primary experiences. Deeply held convictions sufficient to untangle one from the web of current behaviours and to steer for a new horizon, require a strength that only those two forms of knowing together can provide.

Providing primary encounters with the raw world for people is do-able, right here, right now, indeed at this very moment. It is really quite simple – if rarely practiced in our schools. Here’s how; by creating a setting within which a person can encounter a portion of the world with a corresponding portion of his/her deeply held beliefs and feelings. This meeting can be further nurtured so as to develop into a dialogue, aided by the many expressive materials and techniques residing within the arts. Why emphasize the means and materials of the arts? Surely the sciences can promote this empathic way of knowing as well, but for a number of reasons sure to raise an argument, and not exactly to the purpose of this essay, I wish to devote attention here to artistic ways of knowing, and commensurate ways of behaving.

Everyone has intuitions, everyone experiences ineffable Inclinations. The difference between an artist type and non-artist type is when an artist type of person, has an intuition, an inclination of some kind: the artist-type takes it seriously. And the non-artist type sloughs it off, as a passing irritation in the eye, a little ringing in the ear. The artist type person pauses long enough to hold on to this momentary phenomena, reflect on it and mine it for its possible worth by taking the idea examining it closely, experimenting with its many permutations, and then refining these initial and partial and barely coherent ideas/ images to ripeness. An artist type of person is an ordinary type of person who takes primary experience seriously and then wrestles it in into its implications and gives significant and signifying form to it so that it is readable and its is credible:

first to themselves and then to those who would listen.

Epiphanies are serious business for artists, they are madness for others. Within conventionally constructed institutions, epiphanies are seen as a kind of aberrant thought process holding little of value, or worse. And it's true, but it is not entirely true. There are some insights, there are some intuitions, there are some visions that do bring in important news. And even if it is not in accord with the prevailing reality, again, the artist type of person is the person who takes that seriously, and then struggles to find the words to say it full and clear- if at times, unwelcome and difficult for others – at the time – to deceiver.

Another way of knowing that our society discredits is the process and the substance of dreaming. "You're a dreamer," is a pejorative term. But that's a pity because dreaming is a way of knowing, it's a way of forming experience into meaningful wholes. Other societies taking dreams seriously, even in our literature, in our own mythopoetic literature, and general literature dreams have informed conventional waking life and it is a pity that we don't, as a culture, explore more seriously the cultivation of dreaming and its meanings to enlarge the modalities of learning employed in our schools, and ultimately enrich and enlarge our cosmology. Well, I happen to have a dream, I have lots of dreams, but this particular one was one that changed the quality of my life. I don't always remember my dreams, but this was a particularly shattering one and I did awake and wrote it down as much as I could.

[Reading from the section of Drawing Closer to Nature entitled, And from this dream I awoke.]

As a consequence of this dream my views of life and death have been shifted accordingly. Something actually happened to me, and I cannot ignore it any more than I can or would ignore any other profound meeting. The story and its observations on the nature of life and death may not concur with other mythologies or science with which I am familiar but all the other mythologies and biology has only been told to me. It seemed true to me at the time of their telling and the presenters of the information seemed reliable, but my personal experiences, intuitions, dreams are the only things that I know as a consequence of the

primary encounters with the tiny - but singularly significant portion of the universe I happen to inhabit. That's the kind of living that is an "artist's way of living." Seeing for the first time. Taking that seriously. Making meaning of that. And then shaping a life accordingly.

Well, those are several examples of ways of knowing that are, I am sure, akin to everybody here, and my argument is, that we create ways of instructing our next generation in such a way as to take seriously this wider array of knowing, and therefore giving credence to dimensions of our selves and our world that otherwise go begging. No, even worse, become damaged by sins of omission and commission. Introducing back into our cultural heritage these ancient and currently still available ways of knowing, these artistic ways of knowing, may open us to experience ourselves in the world more deeply, more deliciously, more carefully. And that would be a welcome change from the way things are just now.

Thank you.