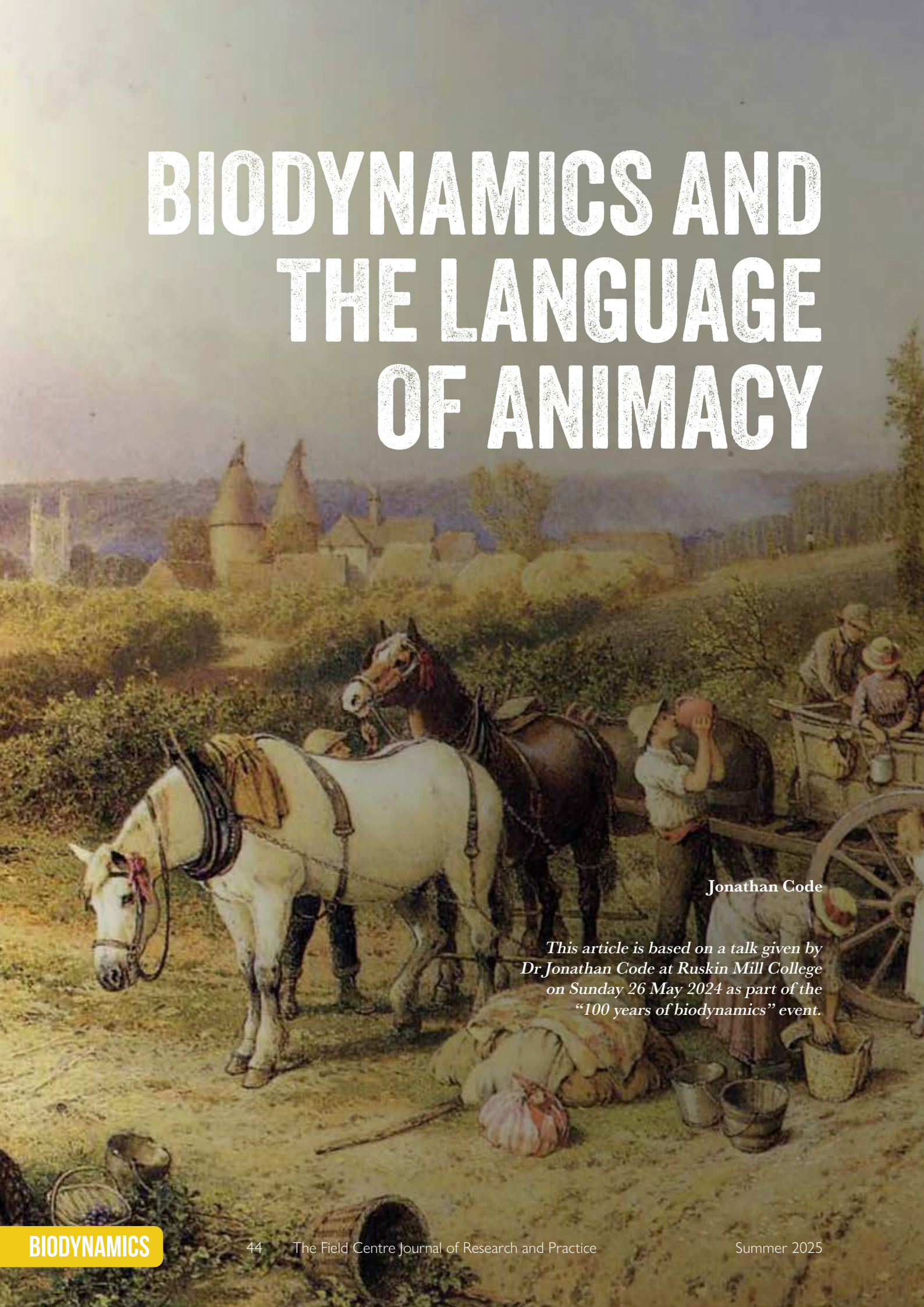


BIODYNAMICS AND THE LANGUAGE OF ANIMACY

A detailed painting of a rural scene. In the foreground, two horses are harnessed together, one white and one dark brown. A man in a light shirt and hat stands between them, holding a red object to his head. To the right, a wooden cart is partially visible with another person inside. The ground is dirt with various buckets and a pumpkin. In the background, a valley opens up with a large stone castle or fortress on a hill under a hazy sky.

Jonathan Code

*This article is based on a talk given by
Dr Jonathan Code at Ruskin Mill College
on Sunday 26 May 2024 as part of the
“100 years of biodynamics” event.*

I will give a bit of context for the title of this talk, “Biodynamics and the Language of Animacy”, in a moment, but first I want to share the following.

Morning musings

Often, before giving a talk like this, I wake up very early in the morning... before the wrens...and sometimes in these pre-dawn hours a subtitle or pre-title might come to join the main heading that I am going to speak about. What came to me this morning, as I listened out for the dawn chorus, is “if biodynamics is the answer, what’s the question?”

There’s a reason for me waking up with this thought – prior to speaking in a gathering for biodynamic practitioners – and I’ll explain why by starting with a couple of stories.

One story arises from a recent visit I made to a farm close to where I live in Stroud. It’s a very innovative enterprise which has developed a CSA, a veg box scheme, is raising cows, and is establishing agroforestry. The farm is developing in a very dynamic and inspiring way. The founder of the initiative has a mission to increase the amount of small-scale farming undertaken around the UK and I think he will do it because I have a sense for who he is. So, standing in front of the cows in one of his fields, beautiful cows with shapely horns, I asked, “What about biodynamics? Are you doing biodynamics?” And his answer was, “I don’t see the point.”

There is no criticism here, mind, it is just an experience I am reflecting on. It was, for me, an intriguing response.

I woke up with another question this morning and wrote to a colleague of mine from the Royal Agricultural University, Professor Tom McMillan, and I asked, “Tom, does biodynamics feature in the National Food Strategy?” This is the UK’s National Food Strategy that was developed under the coordination of Henry Dimbleby. Tom McMillan sat on the board and so I put this question to Tom. I wrote to him... after the wrens woke up... and got an email back almost immediately: “Lots on organics, quite a bit on agroecology. I don’t think biodynamics is mentioned”. So, biodynamics doesn’t seem to have a place at the table, so to speak, in the UK’s National Food Strategy.

Again, I treat these experiences as intriguing phenomena. I don’t want to load them, read too much into them, I just want to say they are

interesting phenomena to consider after a hundred years of biodynamics.

Reduction

To give some context for why I share these stories and how they inform the title of this talk, I’ll now place myself in the picture. I am a senior lecturer at the Royal Agricultural University (RAU) in Cirencester, lecturing in a range of disciplines and degrees in land, environment and agroecological subject areas. The perspective I want to bring to this talk is from agricultural *education*, i.e. not from a biodynamic grower’s or farmer’s context per se but from that of education and research. So what follows are ponderings arising from my perspective as an educator in the first agricultural college in the English-speaking world (now the Royal Agricultural University).

The RAU was established in 1845. To step closer to why I have given this talk the title and pre-title that I have, consider for a moment what the agricultural landscape might have looked like in 1845. Although it asks that we take a little bit of creative licence, let’s consider an artistic rendition of an agricultural landscape in this period:



Myles Birket Foster (1825–1899), *The Farm Cart*

What do we see in this picture? What impressions do we get of this landscape? We see people, and we see animals, we see people from different generations and a number of different animals. So, when the RAU started in the mid-19th century, human beings were very present in the agricultural landscape. Animals were very present in the landscape. The will forces and activity of living beings were – in short – integral to agriculture and they animated the agricultural space. It is around this time that my great-grandfather, a homesteader in Saskatchewan,

Canada, was breaking prairie sod with a team of horses, cultivating the land to establish and maintain his patent or land grant. Very hard work, let's make no mistake about that – hard for both horse and human, and the agricultural story at this time is contingent on human and animal life and their will forces.

Now let's look at another image. This next photograph was not taken in the UK but in the US.



Farmers harvesting corn at the C.M. Hick farm near Altoona, Iowa, on 4 December 1924. Photo by International Harvester Company.

It is a photograph taken at a particular moment in agricultural time, at the same time, in fact, that Rudolf Steiner gave his agricultural lectures in central Europe (in 1924). This is also a really interesting image. The tractor is starting to make its way into the world, although it is still working in tandem with a team of horses that are collecting the harvest. Mechanised 'horsepower' is coming in – the tractor and the combine. In this image we are right on the cusp or transition between muscle power and fossil fuel power.

I'm linking this image to my context of an agricultural university because the universities have been part of this story, of moving towards what we would now call industrial agriculture. It would have been part of the education and research at virtually all agricultural universities of the time to contribute to this story. This is another interesting phenomenon.

Now, here we are in 2024 – a hundred years after that photograph was taken and Steiner's Agriculture Course was given – and the situation has changed radically. The human being has come out of the agricultural landscape. The horse has come out of the agricultural landscape. Humus has come out of the agricultural landscape. We now have industrial agriculture, commodity agriculture, precision agriculture. We have very, very specific applications of precisely measured nutrients to square metres of a

field, done with a kind of pseudo-cosmic agriculture. The cosmic factor is not planets or moon phases (as would have featured in agricultural almanacs of old) but is a satellite positioned over the Earth that is telling the computer in the tractor what to do. The satellite and silicon chip determine how to apply the fertiliser or other agricultural chemicals at specific rates.

So, to carry on with the picture I am developing, I joined a research seminar some time ago to hear about lab-grown meat because there was a colleague at the RAU who was involved in this work. I joined the seminar because I am trying to understand how the agricultural story continues. Lab-grown (or 'cultured') meat is part of the story I am describing. This is described as 'slaughter-free' animal protein, 'low impact' meat, 'clean meat', 'cultivated meat'... it goes by many names.

This is something to really contemplate. Is it meat? Can we call it meat? Can we call it beef? These questions point to the importance of words and of language. There is a significant discourse right now about the naming of this product... whether ontologically we can use the term 'meat' for a product that does not come from a fully developed animal. And, furthermore, can we really have a picture of a cow on the packaging when the product is derived from some few specially selected cells from the cow and not the whole animal? (Is an animal just a collection of cells?)

Another interesting development in the agricultural space that I frequently encounter is students who are saying, "I want to do my research on vertical farming". Vertical farming is gaining attention globally and the way vertical farming is often spoken about is that "... it is fantastic, it doesn't take up a lot of land" and, more strikingly, "it is soil-less!" Given the level of technical involvement in these 'farms' (can we call them farms?) much of it can be done with robots so we can also do without humans, it seems... we could therefore call it soul-less farming! So, we arrive at soil-less and soul-less agriculture. I see some shakes of the head in the room, but for now, let's just place these phenomena in this picture we are building. The discourse is that we're better off without soil, which follows on what has been developing as a story in which we're better off without animals, we're better off without humans, we're better off without humus in our agricultural contexts.

These innovations in food production are interwoven with the story that the food we consume can come from processes that are completely controllable and ever more predictable – produced with finer and finer, calibrated inputs and outputs. And these developments are, in a way, justified through an impeccable logic... a logic that really is

seemingly water-tight: too much fertiliser damaging our rivers? We can be more precise with how much we use. We have a climate crisis? Let's get rid of the cow. We have a soil loss crisis? Well, we don't really need soil. We have a water crisis? We can just circulate the water around and around again. The new developments in water for urban environments, for water in every environment, is that we will just clean it mechanically and recirculate it. But it will never see the light of day. It will never feel a breeze. It will never actually go through any kind of process of revivification (why would it... it's just H_2O ... right?!)

If biodynamics is the answer...

From where I stand in a contemporary agricultural university, these developments create a challenge for someone who thinks that biodynamics has something to offer – a lot to offer – at this time. And this leads me to the thought, “If biodynamics is the answer, what's the question?”. This occurred to me this morning because what's intriguing is that the question isn't being asked. In many of the forums I find myself in, the question isn't being asked about what biodynamics can contribute agriculturally at this time. I think that this is because *reduction* and *de-animation* continue to inform a good deal of our thinking about the animal, the plant, the soil. There is a mechanistic and instrumentalist thread that persists strongly in how agriculture – or rather food production – is addressed and this doesn't seem to be experienced as either troublesome or problematic. How else can we conclude that the animal is not necessary for us to have meat, that soil is merely a growing medium that we can do without, humans can be replaced by robots...?

It's interesting to sit in a room in a research seminar with colleagues who are looking at the potentials for 'cultured' meat and say, “I think there are ontological questions here that need addressing. I think there are epistemological questions that need asking” and to note the responses. These are largely bemusement, and a degree of incomprehension for why I am introducing philosophy into the serious business of technical innovation in food systems.

What's interesting is that this type of questioning (if it occurs at all) is usually behind the wave of innovation for new products because the funding and the enterprise are already focused on getting it out there. The sense-making, the ethicists and even the legal minds are usually trying to catch up, are often well behind, the actual appearance of the product on the market shelf.

So, why is biodynamics not part of the educational landscape in institutions like the Royal Agricultural University? Why is there no higher education programme in biodynamics in any UK university? No module in biodynamics?

This is something to try and understand. The way I make sense of it is this: I mentioned previously that I see an impeccable logic behind many developments in agriculture today, which didn't start last year, last decade, or when Steiner was giving the agriculture lectures. It's a long time ago that we started to think of organisms as mechanisms. It's a long time ago that, in seeking to understand life and the living, we chose to do that by reducing something to its parts and in the process lost any chance of understanding *life*. It's a long time ago that agricultural scientists gave more and more energy and attention to how to kill things while narrowing ever more the selection of plants and animals that were allowed to live. These are long, long stories. And if that story is continued, it makes a kind of strange, logical sense (not that we have to agree with it!) that 'progress' is equated with ever greater reduction of essential aspects of the agricultural organism for better control of the resulting parts. And this of course is a very contemporary story, right down into the genetics.

Ontological discontinuity

So, my proposal is that contemporary agriculture and agricultural education (which is my primary concern and perspective on current agricultural developments) are still very often working with an impoverished epistemology, a reduced ontology, and a language of separation. It is right here that I think biodynamics has something important to offer. Now, I am not going to attempt to elaborate on this proposal by delving into the practicalities of how biodynamic farmers steward the land, tend the plants, and care for the animals, but will do so through a consideration of the role that language plays in our meaning-making. Let me try and explain why I think language can take a pivotal role in all this.

In his fantastic book on Goethean science, Henry Bortoft argues that language doesn't just describe reality — it discloses reality. That's something to chew on when you have time... that language plays a disclosive function in our experience, not merely a descriptive one. It's not just about saying, “Oh, what are we going to call that thing over there so that Bernard and I can share some kind of exchange about it? Let's call it a... hmm chair! You good with 'chair' Bernard?” “Chair,” “OK, so now we have a common word we can use in conversation to talk about that thing over there”. What we often forget is that before either of us could even engage with it, before it is even an 'it', we have to “chair” it first. We have to endow it with a certain “chairness” before we can then stand apart from it and say “chair”. And in our dominant linguistic activity we endow this

thing we call ‘chair’ with object-iveness, it’s a noun, an ‘it’ (and, as a result, so are we). I won’t go into this at great length in this talk, there are many studies that delve into this topic if you want to go further into it.

My proposal is that language plays a fundamental role in reductionist epistemologies and the loss of animacy that results in agricultural domains. In my book *Muck and Mind*, I discuss how the “Enviropig”—a pig engineered or ‘enhanced’ with genetic material from mice and e-coli bacteria – arises from this way of knowing. It’s an assemblage of parts. The epistemological approach that has led to the Enviropig, and the language that informs it, is intrinsically connected to what E.F. Schumacher brilliantly calls “ontological discontinuity.” Schumacher’s *Guide for the Perplexed* is one of the most significant small books you could carry around with you, in my opinion. Ontological discontinuity means that we don’t change our way of knowing when we shift our attention from mineral to plant, to animal, to human, or to more-than-human domains. We have an epistemological lens and language, developed and perfectly suited to our studies of the inorganic realm, but that we assume gives us access to the whole show – we apply that way-of-knowing universally. This leads to ontological discontinuity. It is a way of knowing that – in Schumacher’s terms – is not *adequate* to the task of making sense of the living world of the plant, the animate and sentient world of the animal, and the self-conscious realm of the human. It is inadequate, in other words, to understanding animacy. I’ve called this an epistemological problem, an ontological problem, and I also see it as a languaging problem. I’ll share another recent experience of mine and another story and then come back to why I think biodynamics may have some significant offers to make at this time.

Spirit markers

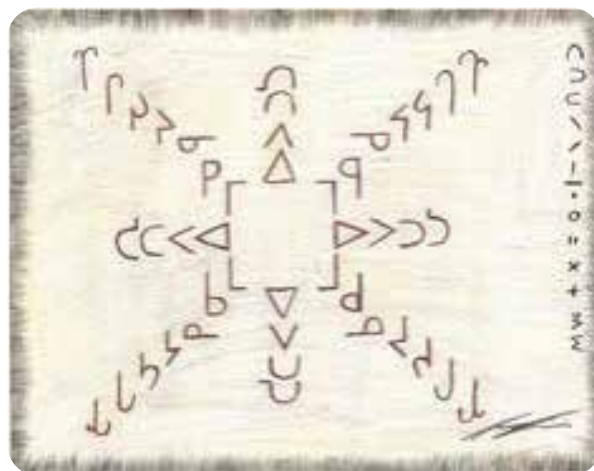
A year and a half ago, at Christmas, my father gave my youngest daughter a book which I promptly borrowed and read from cover to cover. The book is by Tomson Highway and is called *Permanent Astonishment*. Tomson Highway grew up in the far north of Canada. He was born in a snowbank, and you might say, “What do you mean, born in a snowbank?” You read the book and grasp that he was, literally, born in a snowbank, in minus 20-degree weather, while his family travelled through the Arctic by dog sled. It’s a phenomenal story. Now, Tomson Highway is Cree, or rather Nehiyaw. “Cree” is a term given to this group of people by the French colonialists; they refer to themselves as “Nehiyaw”.

I became very intrigued when reading Highway and learning that the Nehiyaw language is – like many Indigenous languages – verb-based. They have few nouns in their grammatical structure because

the language is inherently activity-based, and it is intrinsically relational. Fundamentally, the language relates. The language activates. The language lives. Tomson Highway says, “We can’t help but laugh when we speak Cree because it’s such a lovely, light language. As soon as we speak English, we all get very serious and kind of dour.”

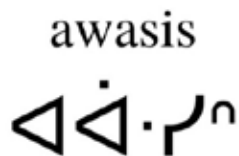
So part of my study right now is Nehiyaw – not because I think I’ll ever have a conversation in this fascinating language with anybody but because trying to slip inside another language is a little bit like what Ed and I attempted yesterday in our Oak workshop – encountering a plant in such a way that we can participate with its becoming and not just treat it like an object, an ‘it’... allowing the plant to teach us about itself. Well, my sense is that languages can be teachers, and they can reconfigure our way of thinking, knowing and being. But it’s not a simple process. For instance, in coming to know something about how Nehiyaw is written, I was fascinated to learn about their ‘spirit markers’. Rather than understand the figures depicted below as merely letters in an alphabet, or a short-form script for how a language is spoken – these are spirit markers. Spirit markers bring to visibility the invisible aspects of Nehiyaw language and culture. Let’s look at a couple of examples to fill this statement out a bit.

If we look at the spirit markers in the East we find the spirit markers for the sounds ‘A, Pa, Ta, La’ – the four grandfathers of the East. There are four grandfather and seven grandmother spirit markers arranged over the eight directions. The Nehiyaw philosophy, ontology, epistemology is woven into these Grandfather and Grandmother spirit markers. Consider the Nehiyawewin word ‘awasis’. It’s very difficult to find a full meaning of the word ‘awasis’ because, typically, when you look it up in a dictionary, it might simply be translated as ‘child’.



Nehiyaw writing system. Photo © Centre for Race and Culture

We find ourselves faced with the difficulty of trying to translate from one language's context and worldview to another when the worldviews are so completely different. Coming across a word like 'awasis' it is easy to think, "Oh, awasis – child, nice... I have two of them (two daughters)." But the meaning of the word awasis in Nehiyaw is "a sacred gift on loan from creation, for you to raise on behalf of Creation". I hope you can feel how that just turns everything completely inside out, even if just for a moment: "a sacred gift on loan from creation, for you to raise on behalf of Creation".



This is a profoundly different meaning from simply saying 'my child' or 'this is my daughter'. What I'm arriving at is this: it's very difficult to break the habit of merely translating a spiritual, verb-based, relational language into a language that is noun-based, that separates, that posits a discrete experience of the world. Here's another example of what I mean. For the Nehiyaw, a good hunter is in tune with and respectful of the animal being pursued, and sometimes the animal takes pity (in a time of hunger, or great need for instance) and offers itself to the hunter. This concept is known in Nehiyaw as 'mikawisowin' a gifting or giving. This account is given by a hunter: "When I was a child, there were hunters who were so attuned that they could dream of the animal they were hunting and know exactly where to find it. This is also a form of 'mikawisowin'".

This account might remind a number of people in the room that there was someone in the global biodynamic community (who, sadly, is no longer with us) who accessed and practised this capacity. Devon Strong was a farmer who embodied this way of being, knowing and relating. Devon saw and fostered animacy, acknowledged it in Indigenous language and culture, and farmed biodynamically in a spiritually informed practice supporting the living, dynamic and relational nature of substances and beings in the agricultural organism. I think we can come back to the question that I woke up with this morning at this point.

... what's the question?

I think biodynamics can contribute to the following questions which are of great import today: what are we going to do about the fact that our soils are dying under intensive, industrial management

methods, our food has lost nutritional value and diversity, our animals are in danger of being reduced to mere protein cultivated in petri dishes, and plants are being grown divorced from soil, sun and soul?

These questions seem to me to sit squarely amongst others in what we could call an age of crisis – a time with no shortage of crises to attend to. We have a biodiversity crisis and a climate crisis. We have a cost-of-living crisis, a healthcare crisis, an inequality crisis, a social isolation crisis... the list goes on. To a large extent, I think that many of the crises we encounter today arise from a crisis of meaning. That would be my hypothesis or diagnosis. My proposal would be – and I think that this has been spoken in some of the biographies that colleagues have shared this weekend – that many of these crises inevitably arise from the dominance of reductive ways of knowing and a de-animation of our lifeworld that has followed.

So, if biodynamics has contributions to make to these challenges, which I think it does. I think it will be to contribute to a re-animation of our ways of knowing as well as, or along with, how these inform our ways of growing. There are a lot of re-sponses right now to the issues named above – re-wilding, re-generating, re-storing – but it needs to be noted that it is still rare in many of these to have attention given to a re-orientation (in Schumacher's terms a "restoration of the vertical") that would acknowledge animacy in plants, sentience in animals, and self-awareness in humans. Instead, ontological discontinuity persists in many of the responses we find to our current crises, in the ways in which these are put forth, and in how they are enacted. Many of these responses are making significant contributions to restoring soils, supporting healthy plants and so on – but my sense is that we can go further.

I think that biodynamics can (potentially) be part of the answer to the questions and conundrums we are faced with in so many areas. I say potentially because not all of what biodynamics has to offer can readily be taken on in many agricultural contexts today given the strong reductive and instrumentalised approaches to food systems that persist at this time. This said, I notice that an increasing number of students who I work with are finding inspiration in the works of Kimmerer (who introduced me to 'languages of animacy'), and Highway, Bortoft, McFarlane, Schumacher and others. Steiner's agricultural lectures repeatedly advise the reader to remain in the realm of the living, in both ways of knowing and ways of growing. In these lectures we find the agricultural organism described with a language of animacy that invites the agricultural educator and practitioner into a living, ensouled agri-culture which seems to me to be a most welcome response to the current questions that sit at the root of so many crises we are encountering at this time.