



Pittosporum phillyreoides

Eucalyptus rubida

Newsletter of The Centre for Ecology & Spirituality,
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At the end of the dry season (April) we found this exquisite pittosporum near the sand lunette of Lake Mungo, near where the 30-40,000 year old remains of Mungo Lady and Mungo Man were found.

What does it mean to be Human?

At a time when Thomas Berry is urging us to re-define the human as a species, this is a really important question.

Homo sapiens is the only member of the Homo species to survive to the present. The most recent other representatives of our species would have been the Neanderthals who died out maybe 20,000 years ago in Europe and the recently discovered remains of the smaller 'human' on the Indonesian island of Flores.

It seems that Homo sapiens has been undergoing subtle modifications during the last 10,000 years which in a manner of speaking could be taken as a process of speciation. The agricultural revolution of about 10,000 years ago was probably one such occasion when the human moved from being predominately a hunter gatherer to being located in settlements where the land was farmed and animals raised.

At about this time, and probably because of this move, written language began to make its appearance. Darryl Reaney* suggests that this was a crucial period in the development of human identity as we know it today. In brief summary he points out that earlier humans did not have the sophisticated experience of what we in our culture refer to as our ego. Earlier humans were more identified with clan, land and animals, something that indigenous peoples still have and cherish.

The earlier human experienced and measured time as cyclic, as in when they referred to events as happening 'many moons ago'. The month mirrored the lunar as well as the menstrual cycle. Even now the Jewish calendar is still lunar, and it lingers on in the Christian celebration of Easter.

Earlier groups of humans frequently identified themselves with a totemic animal which they saw as embodying the great ancestral creative spirit, into which they might be reabsorbed at death. Our idea of ego with its assumptions of independence, autonomy and immortality had not developed prior to more modern times.

Up to now, this 'instinct' might be recognised in our Christian traditional language of oneness with Christ as an iconic or totemic person, and our eventual re-unification with God. The question might be, is there a middle ground that could bring us back to a less transcendental language, to a more cosmic way of speaking, respectful of the sacramentality of nature, and less ego-centric and nature-phobic?

The modern human is very conscious of the passing of time compared with earlier humans. We live longer, maybe four times longer than our ancestors, and Reaney says that with the arrival of written forms of language about 8,000 years ago we had more accurate ways of realising the passing of time, recording it and planning for the future, not that we are very good at the latter.

out of our egos. Interestingly, renowned writer Satish Kumar recently said in a lecture at CERES that 'ego' and 'eco' do not easily co-exist.

The experience of the Flinders Ranges was something else. The ranges have exposed a unique series of rock strata that allow you to walk through around 100 million years of time commencing with the earliest origins of single celled and multicellular life.

What does it mean to be human so that the human and the setting in which the human is embedded, both survive? It seems that we need both individually and as a race to recover our identity of embeddedness in nature rather than cultivate a very limited ego that pretends we are separate from it.

I hold that this is work for heart as



Ancient stromatolites, Flinders Ranges

Nine of us had the opportunity last month of travelling on the annual retreat/tour to Lake Mungo and the Flinders Ranges. Lake Mungo has been given World Heritage status for several reasons associated with the preservation of human cultural events and scientific discoveries made there. The experience we had there of sunrise and sunset on the sand dunes of the lunette cannot be described. It took us out of ourselves,

well as mind. Can we respectfully reframe the words of Jesus "The Father and I are one" as parallel to the notion that we are one with what we may call nature, or more metaphysically, with the mystery that surrounds and leads us on - to an emptying of self, and a discovery of what it really means to be human living a gospel of comprehensive compassion.

Trevor Parton

* Darryl Reaney, *Death of Forever*