



Eucalyptus rubida

Newsletter of The Centre for Ecology & Spirituality,
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Newsletter No.37

Winter 2009

Wombat is one of the nocturnal members of the Glenburn community.

What Ultimately Matters?

Do you remember? This question was asked in a passing fashion in the Spring edition last year. It is a question that I often throw at people to get them thinking. This question is a bit of a tease, and I hope you do not expect me to give a comprehensive answer to it. Nevertheless it is an interesting philosophical question, and maybe ecology can give us some clues to sort out matters of importance in our lives.

When you live in times or incidents of high crisis the question normally answers itself, as people spontaneously perform acts of heroism. Other people routinely and quietly live heroic lives in what life demands of them every day, whether it be with chronic illness or the care of others.

Some clues to what matters can be gleaned from observation of the world around us, and I don't just mean humans. Kangaroos often hop through our property in groups. One group looks like there is a large male and the rest females or young ones. The continuation of life seems one of the constants of the animal world. Males of several species defend their right to mate with the females of the herd. Nature exhibits an imperative to procreate and so perpetuate the species.

Is this what the human is about? In one sense yes. If we stopped procreating, the race would die out in a generation, so for us, yes, it is one of the things that ultimately matters.

Ecology tells us that we are involved in a network of relationships that provides us with an identity. Echoes of Martin Buber and the *I-Thou*, where the hyphen in this phrase is symbolic of the relationship. Words also cannot be more than symbols, even the word *God*. In fact some say that *God* is code for the mystical reality we find in relationships. Interesting metaphysics?

We owe a lot to our relationships, whether it be a marriage relationship, or perhaps a more transpersonal relationship with aspects of the natural world. Are you in one of these latter spaces? I would guess that readers of this sort of publication might well be.

But we can all relate to wordless conversations we have had in the forest, say, or at sunset, or beside a flowing creek high in the mountains. The poem on the back page might be considered one of these. The kind of knowing we come to in these situations is reminiscent of biblical *knowing*

between partners.

Many indigenous cultures witness to this kind of relationship and experience. Their poetic expressions of identity with *land* for example can be sublime. Once again, in this usage, the word *land* is symbol and indicative of something transpersonal.

But to return to the question; take a very ordinary experience we all have - coffee. In one instance, either alone or with a friend, we go to a favourite place, and, relaxing in its ambience we sip an exquisitely prepared



latte, enjoying every drop. In another, it is gulped down in the staff room as we frenetically look for a clean cup or complain about the cheap brand supplied. In one case only is the coffee *known*. In the East the tea ceremony is so valued that it becomes virtually a spiritual practice.

Is this knowing important, or more possibly ultimately important? Possibly so. All we ever have is the present moment squeezed in between the last moment and the next, like a note in a cadence of music. Maybe it is the music that is important, and music is surely about relationships.

Every moment asks of us some duty or task set us by the previous. Sometime this is pleasurable, sometimes sad, sometimes wrenchingly sacrificial. Ask the soldier at war. Ask the mother of a dying child. Some-

times you can be Abraham on the mountain with Isaac, asked for ultimate sacrifice, or Mary at the Annunciation, being invited to incarnate the divine. Everything you have done so far in the past, asks of you the next heroic or simple deed. This deed might be to die with dignity or to save a nation by public service - or to drink your coffee with attention - with awareness.

Everything is about ecology, taken in the broader sense. It is like the *Tao* which connects everything. In more Western terms we describe *God* as being the ground of being. Words are symbols. Words and symbols are about ideas. For me this does not denigrate them (words), but puts them in correct perspective. The important knowings about life are well beyond words and beyond symbols. Knowing is about relationship and identity.

Thomas Berry says that the practice of ecology is a practical spirituality. Spirituality here taken to include stepping into each next moment with anticipation for its potential to enhance our relationship with the sacred, sensuous *milieu* around us. The word *milieu*, taken in the sense of Teilhard's classic *Le Milieu Divin*.

For those who prefer God language, then I would suggest that *God* is to be found in the relationship. However I prefer the immanence of the previous paragraph.

For ecology, consider the possibility that when our relationship with the natural world has reached a deeper level of *knowing* we will have become an expanded child of the cosmos, truly one with the universe. To the extent that we individually or as a culture fail to connect deeply with our world, we might be denying our deeper selves, and setting ourselves up for existential chaos.

Is the question any clearer? Sometimes it is important to understand the question first and then wait patiently for the answer. I would love any of our readers to respond to this essay with ideas of their own. I could publish their views on our website. I hope this has been useful.

Trevor Parton

Reading:

I and Thou by Martin Buber.

Radical Knowing by Christian de Quincey

Ecopsychology by James Hillman et al.