Reflection: Return to the Oral

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I do believe that we humans wish to be good to one another and want to be treated kindly. We do take care of each other. We take of our elders and our children.

But we do not take care of our aging elders or our children because we own them. We care for them, would even give our lives for them, because we love them. Love not possession. Relationship not ownership. While that's only obvious, it is an important thing for me to keep in mind as I engage with what I think is a planet and soul saving question (as if soul and planet were extricable from one another).

The question is: given our colonial ancestry and present mobility, how do we come to feel truly at home, beloved of place, wherever we live, with deep, reciprocal integrity? How do we love the earth? How do we become embedded rather than exploitative? How do we become indigenous, which is to say, "generated by a place," without being invaders? How do we find home through giving and receiving love rather than ownership?

We have by and large forgotten how to do this and the consequences have been catastrophic. True, home still sometimes happens for us as individuals. Though that is more often by happenstance and duration than intention, much less procedure or protocol. I would argue that until our culture rediscovers the solution to this question and moves that solution to the center of our being, we will continue down a ruinous road.

Of course sometimes ruin is an opportunity. The cracks are where the light gets in. And there are cracks aplenty in the crumbling paradigm that brought us to this moment. Not all of them are even painful. Some cracks are quite entertaining.

For instance, with the advent of podcasts and audio books and youtube, and the diminishment of newspapers and, to some degree, reading books, we have, as a culture, taken a partial turn back to orality. This is a medium of information exchange that, while never entirely done away with, has played second fiddle to the written word for at least 400 years; ever since Gutenberg made mass literacy accessible and advantageous.

Some have lamented this drift away from literacy. However, I would suggest that this organic shift, subtle as it may be, back toward orality speaks (no pun intended) to a way of being that may inform that planet saving question I spoke of earlier.

So how does the written word impact our ability to be at home without ownership? Well, to explore that question we must first set the stage with a tip of the cap to oral traditions. We of the

written word and google cloud may be amazed at the amount of information that can be stored, accessed, and conveyed without script and codes.

The Navajo are reported to have had fairly detailed knowledge of over 700 insects. That data set included key entomological attributes and impacts, of course, but were also frequently cross referenced with mythologically coded ethics and other information. Insects became memory palaces for cultural knowledge and cultural knowledge became a memory palace for insect data. And that is just insects, a tiny slice of the amount of information they were able to store and convey without writing.

Australian Aboriginal memory systems accurately relate changes in the landscape dating back some 10,000 years. Imagine knowing the history of this place, where you sit right now, as well as you know the history of your immediate family but extending back to twice the age of the earliest pyramid. Not just knowing it as trivia, but as interlaced with cultural knowledge, agricultural application, and identity signposts. Not just knowledge, but a plan, a reality.

Similar astounding feats of data management can be found the world over. The common threads seem to be the investment of story into sensual material, be it a mountain, bead, insect, or boomerang. It is a potent brew of deep capacity.

Of course, we were all oral, ancestrally. But our paths diverged.

The earliest form of writing was more art than script. Images of the natural world were used to record events, tell stories, and convey information. The images were derivative of the physical world; they looked like things. Over time these pictures morphed into ideograms, where a word was more of a symbolic representation than a depiction of the thing it represented. Think of Chinese characters.

One of the earliest ideographic writing systems arose in Egypt some 5,000 years ago. Idiographic images are still more imitative than abstract and so are rather closely bound to the sensual world.

The trouble with this system is that it means that only very few, professional elites could wield it. There's just too many words, each requiring their own specific ideogram. A Chinese dictionary compiled in the early 1700's listed well over 40,000 different ideographic characters.

While ideograms are great for conveying ideas that are, if you'll pardon the expression, literal depictions of something (a dog, rice, running), that leaves a lot out. It is hard to depict compassion, growth, or life. So writing evolved to make use of puns.

For example, the Sumerian word for “life” is pronounced *ti.* This is conveyed in writing by adapting and contextualizing the ideograph for arrow, which was also pronounced *ti.* These puns are called rebuses and represent an order of abstraction away from literal representation, away from writing being directly linked with the sensed world. A key step.

Incidentally, I must attribute David Abram’s *The Spell of the Sensuous* for much of this history lesson. Abram points out that the rebuses eventually evolved into syllabaries; systems of writing that are linked more to the sound of the word than what the word signifies. Another level of abstraction out of ecology.

From syllabaries it is but a short journey into the alphabet, or rather first into the *aleph bet* of the Hebrews, which had obvious influence on the alphabet of the Greeks, which then becomes our own; a writing system wholly abstracted from the world it signifies. This reflects, reinforces, and crafts a way of being *in* the world that is quite distinct *from* the world.

Writing changed how we related to reality. It changed our minds. Our sense of meaning and connection was no longer embedded in an animated world of which we were a function. For instance, the particular spiritual presence of a place or being was displaced and abstracted into the idea of *the holy* and repositioned as a universal divine so obtuse and not of this world that you were not permitted to utter its name. Writing birthed god.

There also seems to be some correlation between writing and the development of mass agriculture and large concentrations of people. In other words writing co-evolved with the objectification and exploitation of the ecosphere.

In contrast with oral information systems, writing extricated and isolated knowledge and, in so doing, dissociated us from that of which we are a part. It correlates with the rise of the paradigm of separation and domination. It presaged the creation of capital, which is the abstraction of value from material, even as it gutted matter of agency and personality. Writing abstracts us out of ecology, and turns our beautiful world, our mother, our home, into an “other,” to be subdued, exploited, owned, or defended against.

Despite those grievances, it is also true that the perks of writing are as innumerable as its failings are profound. I love writing. But in writing, and I know this is maddening to some of you, I hope my rhythm, cadence, and alliteration convey a mood and zhwerve that returns some more-than-intellectual experience to the data conveyed. I mean, I hope its contours are as beautiful, as its contents are relevant.

There is much benefit, art, and beauty in the written word. The program would not be to eliminate writing. The program would be, as with any powerful substance, to embrace the good

of it and become aware of its dangers - to scaffold it or, in this case, balance it with a reinvestment in primacy of the oral.

I submit to you, and am neither original nor alone in doing so, that the memory systems required of oral cultures are part and parcel with their integrity with their ecosystem. The memory systems required of oral cultures are part and parcel with their integrity with their ecosystem. I suspect oral mnemonic strategies establish and secure their indigeneity, bind them to place; infuse life with meaning and matter with agency.

I've witnessed that when you invest story into matter, it opens a connection. Then matter (or more likely the innumerable systems that manifest as matter in any given moment) *talks back* and invests in you. This is a cultivation of interbeing, the impact on meaning and identity of interdependence.

And that is how we save the world as the world saves us. This is how we move from exploitation to integrity, from ownership to love, from colonists to homegrown. Invest story into the physical surround. Cultivate relationship. Fall in love.

The next step is, well… I guess I want to think about it a little bit more. I don't want to make more mistakes fixing the old mistakes. But at some point, and some point soon, it's time to run the experiment; to invest story into matter and see what happens. I've got some ideas. Maybe I should write them down.