

2007 CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

ANIMA MUNDI

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The following includes excerpts from Alan York's keynote address at the 2007 Biodynamic National Conference, held in August at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California.

The full version of this speech will be available on the Association's web site, www.biodynamics.com.

I wanted to thank all of you for coming this morning, because this is a subject that is really dear to my heart. I've never felt such a kaleidoscope of emotions about something, because . . . being uneducated is a gift in a way, because your mind never gets in the way—of anything. And you just have these pure experiences. Being in the swamps when I was a little kid, it was the most amazing thing. I mean, you felt like you were just embedded in this thing that just pulsed with life. Of course, you had no conceptual understanding whatsoever [about] what was going on. But, you know, you really felt that life was so intense and you were so immersed in it that there was no such thing as a separation between you and it and what was going on and everything. And then you get older and you start having ideas, and you come up with these ideas like the soul of the earth. And you think, "This is exactly what I experienced."

On the other hand, there are very different perspectives about that. And one of those perspectives is that Biodynamics is nothing more than a pseudo-scientific fantasy. That's a pretty good description, right? But you can understand why someone would say something like that. In the world that we live in, with the atomistic worldview in which the rational mind is dominant—to discuss a realm of the soul, you're on shaky territory. You can't quantify it. It's a qualitative world. And it's so rich and deep with our experiences.

. . . This idea of the earth having a soul is really an ancient idea and when we look back in history, really, is a common experience. Even when history first started and we have the written word, we see in Plato's *Timus*, . . . that he says, "The world is indeed a living being supplied with soul and intelligence—a single visible entity containing all other living entities." The world itself was considered to have a soul—the *anima mundi*—which has given birth to matter and then caused it to remain in ceaseless motion. *Anima mundi* was feminine and permeated every aspect of the material universe.

This has been a really long intellectual and spiritual journey that has brought about the progressive ascent of the human being to autonomy. A completely separate entity in which all of us experience in our modern state of consciousness that we perceive and feel ourselves as completely individualized and separated from—just in the same way that I look out here at you and see a whole host of human beings as individuals, you look up here at me and see me as an individual. But what price has been paid for that autonomy? For that freedom as an individual?

I think that we can see this expressed in modern terms in

two different views that we see in the world today. The first would be expressed in the language of quantum physics. And I will take great liberty in articulating this. I'm not a scientist, so don't expect this to be very scientific. We are embedded in the universe, and what we observe is reflected back on us. Every sight, sound, texture, taste, and smell is the product of an observer. As the observer changes, so do all these qualities. We perceive imagination, beauty, creativity in ourselves and, thus, see the same in nature. Every attribute of the human mind is embedded in the universe.

Now, from a purely materialistic view, we have a belief in science and progress as separate from us as a spiritual entity. We experience loss of community, replaced with individualism and competition. The most famous example of that is when our . . . president made this statement . . . after 9/11: "Go shopping." Is that the epitome of materialism? Of filling of a hole of the soul with consumerism? To not feel at the depth of who we are what happened? It's frightening when you think of that. Feeling isolated and unsupported except on the physical level and the absolute and complete denial of the existence of any transcendent power. That's what I would call looking for meaning in a meaningless universe. How do you find any meaning in life if that is the view of the world that we see? For us, one view is supportive of our understanding of Biodynamics; the other view is what I would call a crisis of skepticism. That we have become so skeptical of everything. The way we feel. We no longer trust our own senses. Our own intuition. Our own knowledge that we gain through our experiences in life. We've gotten to the point where we will trust a machine to tell us how we feel. How ridiculous is that? And so when you look at Biodynamics, it's not unusual—it's completely understandable from that perspective—that it is nothing more than a pseudo-scientific fantasy, because it doesn't lend itself to what can be counted, measured, and weighed.

Now if we look at the two most basic tenets of the worldview out of which Biodynamics came . . . , this worldview developed by Rudolf Steiner called anthroposophy, . . . they are the same two basic tenets of Biodynamics. These are that the earth is a living organism embedded in a solar system, which is embedded in a planetary system, which embedded within a world of the fixed stars. And that we as human beings are a microcosm of the macrocosm. Meaning that everything that exists outside of this world, everything that we experience, is inside of us. And so the way that we actually know the world, and really in truth the only way in which we know the world, is through our own experiences. And that these two things, the earth and the universe as a living entity and us as a microcosm of that macrocosm, are inseparable. And that the evolution of the two have developed together. We cannot see the world as separate from us and us as separate from the world.

Rudolf Steiner cautions us to realize that there are subtle balances at work in the evolution of consciousness. One can see history equally well as the decline of spiritual abilities and the increase of intellectual knowledge, or the decline of religious superstition and the increase of scientific clarity. It's not a ques-



Delicious outdoor meals at Rudolf Steiner College



A rose in Rafael Garden, tended by Harald Hoven and apprentices



Tomatoes provided for the conference by local farmers

tion really whether or not one or the other is solely correct, but at what point and in what way are these working? To be able to identify these is the fulcrum of the evolution of consciousness.

Rudolf Steiner made a really interesting point once when he said that we are stuck in materialism because of our inability to conceive of energies or forces that are not from physical sources. That inability to even conceive of—or what we would call sense-free thinking—if you observe yourself when you think, you realize that it's all based upon physical entities. We come up with ideas like the big bang. A really interesting idea. But this idea that earth and its evolution came from a big explosion and that life just by chance happened to come out of this big explosion, and so guess what we do as human beings? We make big explosions. Because that's what we understand and that's what we came from, a big explosion.

It's a problem. For us, it's a big problem, because Biodynamics is working with life processes. And if this is nothing more than a random chance, then how in the hell are you supposed to work with something that is nothing more than a random assortment of things taking place by chance? It's impossible. There's no way of doing it. What happens when you apply this materialistic form of thinking to the living world is that you get what we call in science "unintended consequences." Meaning that the result is not what you intended. Do you honestly think that it is the intention of agriculture to destroy our environment and pollute our water? I don't think that that was an intention. I could not even allow myself to think such a thing if human beings could be so diabolical that they would intentionally set off to do and create the conditions that exist in the world right now. I would have lost all faith in humanity if that was the case. I can't even conceive of such a thing. But it is a by-product of the scientific worldview, because you cannot apply mechanical physical forces to living entities and expect them to respond in a way that maintains the integrity of life.

... So what I would like to spend the rest of our time ... discussing is, what is this worldview called anthroposophy and how does it allow us insight into taking steps—in a modern way—to bring back that unity that was sacrificed for our autonomy. Rudolf Steiner tells us in *Occult Science* that the evolution of the earth and the human being evolved in four different stages, what he called Old Saturn, Old Sun, Old Moon, and the Earth, the earth as we know it today. And that this evolution at each of its transition points precipitated out the essence of who we are as human beings and that which makes up the world in which we live. And in that transition from Old Saturn to Old Sun, the human ego was developed and the element of fire, the ether, precipitated out. In that transition from Old Sun to Old Moon, what is called the astral body, that which the soul inhabits, precipitated out. These are not physical entities, you understand. And that ether that we call light ether and Old Moon, the etheric or life body, and the element of the water ether. And finally the physical earth and the earth ether.

... [A]t the end of this period of time [during the modern period, after the birth of modern agriculture as we know it and after Francis Bacon's separation of "rational" knowledge from art and spirituality], Rudolf Steiner gave the Agriculture Course. ... [I]t was the emergence of this stream that went underground

through this long [prior] period of time. We call it biodynamic agriculture, but I think that you can see that, not only was biodynamic agriculture the first and original articulated system of organic agriculture, it is the evolution of agriculture from the most ancient time when it began. And today one has to approach it in a very different way than in the past. It's most interesting that Rudolf Steiner—well, it's more than interesting. That's a bit of a cop-out, isn't it? It's just flat-out fascinating. Do you know of anything more interesting and fascinating than Biodynamics? I mean, this thing is forever. If you like challenges, if you like climbing mountains, you will never ever reach it. You'll get to a plateau, and you will see further than you've ever seen before, but believe me, there are more plateaus. That's the really great thing about it. But he approached it in a really different way—almost the opposite of Zarathustra [with whom agriculture originated]. Zarathustra guided humanity to engage their senses into the natural world through what we would call the sentient body. Rudolf Steiner came at it from the wisdom of the human being. And he said, if you want to understand nature, study the human being. If you want to understand the human being, study nature. This micro-macro.

And he articulated for the first time in a very clear—and what we would call scientific—way the four members of the human being: the human ego, the soul, the life body, and the physical body. And he developed, or articulated, ... a system of building fertility that is the recapitulation of these ancient forms. First, the knowledge of tillage. And I will say, I have no reservations about saying, and I know this from my own experience in many different places in the world, it is the *least* understood of agricultural practices and without question has the most dynamic impact upon agriculture. Tillage performed properly is like magic. Tillage performed improperly is one of the single most destructive practices that we have. Plant diversity, this period of time in the medieval, when everything came together, when the animals came together, all the various forms of culture and composting. This understanding that life comes from life. The total opposite of this concept that life came from the non-living. ... I struggled, I *really* struggled with this idea that life came from the non-living. I mean, I'm really open-minded, believe me. I would love to be convinced, but I have a hard time with it. ... [I]t's difficult for me. This is the basis of the biodynamic system.

What he brought in a modern way, and which we all struggle to understand, is how we can concentrate life and soul forces into nature. And this is our work with the preparations. To understand how to work on an energetic level that is not physical, that allows this vitality that we all experience and know that is in Biodynamics.

So in closing, if we are in this period known as the consciousness soul, what does it mean to be conscious? One possible aspect of it is that we are free when we understand our motives—when our motives for what we do come from the freedom of knowledge of what they are and not from an egotistical point of view of what's in it for me. I know, again, from my experience of working with many people and many places, that the people that are really successful, they know what their motives are.

And so, how do we know that, as modern people? I mean,

you cannot count, measure, and weigh that. How do we know that? Well, if—these are the big “ifs,” the fifty million dollar word “I-F”—if we are a microcosm of the macrocosm, if we only know the world through our own experiences, then I would like to suggest to you that that experience that we have when we have the great fortune in our life to meet our soulmates is that experience that allows us to know what our motives are, because when we have that great experience in our life, to be with our soulmate, we know, maybe for the first time, what unconditional love is. And what you would do for that other person out of total selflessness. I would like to suggest to you that that is how we engage with the soul of the earth, that it *is* our soulmate and that our development is inseparable from its development as long as the motivation is true.

I would like to close. . . . I came across one of the most amazing books that I have ever read. It’s from a historian—his name is Richard Tarnas—and he wrote two books. He wrote one book on the history of the evolution of western consciousness, which is the standard textbook in the university on western civilization. But he just recently wrote a book called *Cosmos and*

Psyche, subtitled *[Intimations of] a New World View*.

First paragraph in the second chapter, he says, “Our worldview is not simply the way we look at the world. It reaches inward to constitute our innermost being and outward to constitute the world. It mirrors, but also reinforces, and even forges the structures armoring. . . . possibilities of our interior life. It deeply configures our psyche and somatic experiences. The patterns of our sensing, knowing, and interacting with the world. No less potently, our worldview, our beliefs and theories, our maps, our metaphors, our myths, our interpretive assumptions constitutes our outer reality, shaping and working the world’s malleable potentials into a thousand ways of subtle receptacle interactions. Worldviews create worlds.” Let us go forth and create a better world.

Alan York is a former president of the Biodynamic Farming and Gardening Association, a former editor of Biodynamics, and an internationally respected expert and consultant on biodynamic farming.

