

## INTRODUCTION

**T**OWARD A GREATER AWARENESS OF THE PRIVILEGE OF WHAT IT MEANS TO be the human animal is what this book is about. To me, it is a wild and ethical imperative – an urgent reminder that we are inextricably linked to the land; that the history of every living creature is within us; that we are above all a mindful, poetic species and that we are the “keepers of our zoo”. If we cannot accept this then we will continue to be the creatures of our own undoing.

When we review the history of life on this planet, it is evident that death and, eventually, extinction is the fate of all species and that life, with a will of its own, will continue to find new ways of expressing itself. This in itself is a miracle. But there is another side to this awesome process. Prior to the emergence of humans, nowhere in the evolutionary narrative does it show any one species contributing quite so dramatically to its own extinction, let alone to the extinction of other species such as birds, butterflies and marine animals, plants and beetles, as well as many species we don't even know about.

There is hardly a place on the face of our planet that we have not explored, settled and altered in some way to satisfy our own ends, and the news is not good. The denuding of tropical forests, acid rain, air and water pollution, and diminishing wilderness areas, the introduction of alien vegetation and green house warming all have one thing in common – the human factor. A sobering thought. Even more sobering is the realisation that the natural selection process of evolution is happening right in front of our eyes and we are the force behind it. In response to the well-intentioned use of insecticides, antibiotics and other organic chemicals, the Earth is now host to multiple new strains of “resistant” organisms, from bacteria and viruses to weeds and insects, including more than a hundred new strains of DDT-resistant mosquitoes. Having turned a blind eye to the fact that we are a part of Nature's great diversity, we have become ecologically unintelligent. Lopsided in favour of the angels, we have steadily distanced ourselves from our biological

past. In what is sometimes referred to as the Human-Nature split, we have ignorantly, if not arrogantly, placed ourselves at the apex of creation. It is time to come down from that precarious pedestal.

The big question, of course, is: can we reverse this destructive, self-deceptive trend? Are we willing to come off that pedestal? Something in me says no. It is difficult to counter the argument that the downward spiral of human co-existence with this planet has already begun and that it is too late to make amends; but something in me says yes. It is that something that allows me to continue my work as a psychiatrist, that affirms the belief that when we commit ourselves, we can learn to see ourselves differently. That it is in our nature to change, to adapt, to diversify, to deal with suffering and to discover, with time, that our suffering is sometimes an important part of our healing. It is a belief that the future of human co-existence with the Earth is going to depend just as much on the creativity of its scientists and poets as it does on changes in climate and vegetation. And so, if it is not too late, how do we begin to rediscover ourselves in Nature? How do we begin to heal or to reconcile the Human-Nature split?

**F**irst of all, we have to stop speaking about the Earth being in need of healing. The Earth doesn't need healing. We do. Utterly indifferent to human existence, the Earth will thrive – when we are gone. We are the ones who need to redefine our relationship with it. We are the ones who have become ashamed of our wild nature, and by this I do not mean the coarse, aggressive and self-destructive sense of the word. That is savagery. Instead, we have become apologetic for being dispassionate, spontaneous, raw, territorial, protective and angry. We are the ones who need to do the reaching out, not to save the Earth, but to rediscover ourselves in it.

**H**ealing and mending are often regarded as being the same thing but it is going to be important that we understand the distinction between the two. Healing seldom occurs, if at all, without a profound change in attitude not only to oneself and to the world, but to oneself in the world. Mending – the quick fix – on the other hand, is something

else. As necessary and as convenient as it may be, it seldom makes any demand on one's capacity to reflect or to change one's ways.

Secondly, if we are serious about the healing of the Human-Nature split it is essential that we become more evolutionary minded. We have to wake up to the privilege of what it means to be human: that we are part of a web of life in which everything is genetically and molecularly linked and that human psychology has deep evolutionary roots. We are naturally resistant to change, let alone to admitting our animal past. And yet the evidence is there. With the unravelling of the human genome and the subsequent discovery that more than ninety percent of it is shared with every other mammal, the poets and the old shamans have been proven right. The animals are our soul mates and we are the human animal.

And then there is our link to the Earth itself. I believe that our identity is intimately associated with a deep historical sense of continuity with wild places and the animals that live there – that we have an ancient, genetic memory of where we have come from. These are the places that permit us to say, sometimes unreservedly, “it is as if this place is in my blood ... it is as if I have come home”.

To lose one's sense of union with wild places is to pre-empt what I believe is one of the most overlooked conditions in modern psychiatry – homesickness. Often presenting as a restless depression, homesickness and a loss of wildness are the same thing. So is a loss of soul. Our creativity suffers and so do our relationships. Anyone who vaguely understands the significance of “walk-about” or who longs for the chilling night call of the spotted hyena, *Crocuta crocuta*, or the shape and the shade of the Umbrella Thorn tree, *Acacia tortilis*, will know that restlessness. It is also likely that they will understand the unmistakable homesickness in these lines by the poet, Rainer Maria Rilke:

Sometimes a man stands up during supper,  
and walks outdoors and keeps on walking,  
because of a church that stands somewhere in the East.

The cure for homesickness is to remember where we have come from. It is to rediscover that original church within oneself and to remember that the wild areas of the world are the landscapes of the soul and that the creatures who belong there are soul-makers. We need these places in much the same way that the ancient Celts needed their sacred groves – not because they are there, or because they are beautiful, but for that compulsive union of fact and feeling that we experience when we go there. Deeply visceral, it is the experience of soul. And it is impossible to put a price on it. To remember that church is not enough. We have to be able to go there, also. Be it the desert, the savannah, the mountains, the sea or the wild lands of ice and snow, we have to be able to go to the places where we most belong and where we are most ourselves. It is an inner and an outer journey and our healing depends on both.

To be aware of the evolutionary roots of human psychology is to deepen one's understanding of what is loosely referred to as human nature. Without this understanding, an ecological intelligence is impossible. Unwilling to look at ourselves, we have become masters in the art of finger pointing and self-deception and until we understand the origins and the dynamics of why we do it, any attempt to reconcile the Human-Nature split is going to be futile. It is essential, therefore, that we develop a greater awareness of the structure and functioning of the human psyche, particularly the workings of the human ego – what we refer to as “me”, what it is, how it has evolved, how it defends itself, how blind it can be and yet how essential it is for our survival. Yes, the human animal is a deeply biological being, but we are psychological beings also, creatures that reflect, fantasize, hope, intuit, pray, bless, blame, care, cheat, love and who look for the meanings in things.

To me, psychology begins to make more sense when seen through an evolutionary eye. It comes into its own when we become aware of the universality of the various strategies of survival – the way all animals consciously and unconsciously encounter the world. Say what you wish, we are survivors – the living evidence of more than two million

years of hominin existence and with it a consciousness that has become not only self-aware, but aware of the awareness of others.

Derived from the Greek word *psyche*, which means soul, breath or life, human psychology is the science that studies the conscious and unconscious workings of the human psyche, especially our behavioural and mental processes. It includes the study of thoughts, emotions, feelings, memory, personality and relationships – not only the way we relate to people, places and events, but to the way we relate to ourselves. It is the study of human nature. It is not an exact science and probably never will be, which is why for many scientists it is regarded as being too abstract or too theoretical to be relevant to empirical science. It is essential that this attitude be changed, for not only are we all naturalists of sorts, all of us scientifically curious, we are also philosophers and psychologists, if only in a small way. And what is more, we can't help it! It is in our nature to be objective, to explore, to measure and to define our outer world, but this is only a part of our nature. Human nature is powerfully subjective too; it is both abstract and abstracting, never entirely satisfied with what can be measured, which is why, for everything wonderful about science, somehow it seldom answers the deep, existential questions in our lives.

How, for example, can one possibly discredit those great poetic dimensions of human society – spirit and soul? We readily speak of the spirit of adventure and the spirit of science, of soul mates, soul places and the dark night of the soul. The words are at the tips of our tongues. They are intrinsic to our descriptions of kinship, belonging, connection and continuity. And we know what they mean, even if we cannot fully explain them. They may well be linked to neuro-circuits, neurotransmitters and circulating hormones, as I am sure they are, but *how* they are linked and to which combinations of circuits or neurochemicals, we'll probably never know. It would seem they can't be measured, or better still, they refuse to be measured. Does that make them any less real or, indeed, irrelevant? I think not. Instead, because they are dimensions that are experienced and which add to our sense of

meaning, they need to be understood as psychologically significant and therefore valid.

And then there is language. If we are serious about rediscovering ourselves in Nature, we are going to need a language that speaks for science and soul, that narrows the gap between subject and object, that slips between yes and no. We will need a language that continually reminds us of where we have come from and of what we have to do if we are to become ecologically intelligent. For the time being, the only language I know that can begin to do this is poetry. It may be an extravagant claim, but there is a history to it ...

At the end of 1997, after eight years of working with troubled adolescents and mentally handicapped children, I resigned from my post as the head of the Child, Family and Adolescent Unit at the Lentegour Psychiatric Hospital in Cape Town. My wife and I headed off to the Linyanti wilderness of northern Botswana where, working as a guide and co-manager of a small tented lodge, I was overwhelmed by a sense that I had "come home". I tried to keep a diary, but every time I tried to write down my experiences with animals, it came out in stanza-form. Prose somehow escaped me. Instead, what I was writing was verse – "pure nonsense ... pure wisdom" as the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda said of his first written lines. Where did it come from? I don't know. Gripped by them, it was as if the poems were writing me. I tried to ignore them, but it didn't work. Some of them came quickly, decisively. Some of them refused to be rushed, waiting instead until I was ready for them. Others wrestled with me, sometimes deep into the night. I came to see them as wild gifts.

To begin  
to know wilderness,  
something in me had to die –  
the pregnant parts,  
the motherly expectations  
and the test tube notions  
of a safe delivery.

In the wild  
dead foetuses are for real,  
vultures are the midwives of new life  
And to be abandoned is to grow.

To begin  
to know wilderness,  
something in me had to come alive –  
my wild side,  
the part that knows  
that it is impossible to sleep with the dead  
without being awakened by them.

In the wild  
the animal spirits are for real  
they are the shadows in our bones  
and they come to us  
as wild gifts.

To rediscover ourselves in Nature does not mean turning one's back on technology as is often advocated. Technology is part of our nature. It is part of the evolution of a problem-solving, tool-making species. The harnessing of the molecular formulae of genes, medicinal plants, hormones and tissue extracts to enhance the quality of life of countless human and non-human beings has to be understood as being just as significant as the harnessing of fire by our ancestors *Homo erectus* less than a million years ago. Without technology we could not speak about DNA, there would be no photographs of Earth from space, no understanding of the AIDS virus and no long distance calls from a daughter on her travels in a foreign land. Without technology the monitoring and protection of many of the world's endangered species would be impossible. Celebrate it. Learn how to say yes and no to it.

Throughout this book I have used the paired words 'yes' and 'no' for two very specific reasons. The first is to encourage the reader to become a little more comfortable with paradox – discovering the sometimes irrational yet meaningful truths that are hidden in statements that are seemingly contradictory or absurd. Science has long been familiar with paradox, for example Chaos Theory and with it the recognition that there are patterns of order in what we all too readily interpret as chaotic. And then there is the paradox of the dual perception of light – that it can be perceived as being either waves or particles. The paired words, then, are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they convey a simple wisdom: everything is in process ... every idea, every interpretation and every strategy has at least two sides. The second reason is to remind the reader that yes and no are the two most powerful words in the vocabulary of a species that has become capable of deciding what to do about its future.

