

Apart

The gap between nature and us is only in our heads.



ROBERT

THE USUAL list of humanity's great steps features fire, agriculture, writing and Newton's laws of motion. Other popular candidates are metalworking, reasoning, double-entry bookkeeping, relativity and electronic communications.

But perhaps the biggest, most defining and most wrenching development was not an innovation or a technology. At some point we became self-conscious, aware not merely of our individual identities but also of our collective human difference from everything else. That is when things began to fall apart for us.

Maybe all creatures with even rudimentary brains have a sense of their own being – some awareness of where their extremities end and that beyond these extremities is something else. Maybe plenty of non-human animals are conscious that they are different from others of their species, and from other living and non-living things. Quite likely such consciousness in some way parallels ours.

Oz the dog, with whom we share quarters, has often responded to my suggestions with a quizzical, head-slightly-tilted-to-the-side look that clearly conveys the concept, "What is that idiot on about now?" I get that look frequently enough from my spouse and students to know that it is typically meant to underline an awareness of difference.

But it does not follow that this awareness much occupies the dog's intellectual capacities, or that he is conscious of a gulf between him and his world. His version of self-consciousness seems not to include a high level of self-reflection or worry about his place in nature.

The human version of self-consciousness, in contrast, involves a good deal of thinking about what it means to be what we are and how we fit with everything else. Or at least it once did.

In the stories of the old cultures – those of the largely nomadic aboriginal traditions that occupied most of the human record – humans dealt with their peculiar consciousness by sharing it with the rest of

*The greatest beauty is organic wholeness,
the wholeness of life and things,
the divine beauty of the universe.
Love that, not man apart from that ...*

– Robinson Jeffers

creation. In the old mythological world, everything had spirit and intent. People were different, but were immersed in a world of similar entities.

Gradually that changed. With the coming of herding and farming, and eventually cities, the spirits became gods and the gods became increasingly human in form as well as behaviour.

In the Abrahamic religions, the life of immersion in nature ended with Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden. This was a punishment for disobedience and it led to labour and suffering. The new self-consciousness was animated by the struggle between good and evil, darkened by mortality, and doomed to scratching a living from the manipulation of nature.

Today, in an increasingly industrial and urbanized world, most people are far more distant from a more or less natural environment than were hunter-gatherers or even farmers. Some of the separation is physical, the effect of highrises and highways, electronic media, indoor plumbing and great long product chains from field to fork and forest to furniture.

But we are also unduly apart in our heads, in how we think about our place and role.

We are still, unavoidably, in nature. Moreover, we collectively have an enormously greater stock of information about the biophysical world,

how it functions, what we are doing to it and why it matters. We just need to convert that into a new version of self-consciousness that puts us back in our place.

Fully recovering the mental as well as physical immersion in nature enjoyed by Aboriginal people past and present is probably not an option. We cannot repopulate nature with spirits or recreate the garden of oneness. History has no rewind button.

But surely we can push our understanding up a notch or two – appreciate our origins, grasp our dependence and embrace the mysteries. And it should be as possible in urban ravines and rooftop gardens as in moss-floored rainforests.

Thirty years ago, ecologically inclined motorists favoured a bumper sticker that read, "A part, not apart." It remains a sensible message. Perhaps now is the time to scrape it off the rusting chrome and paste it on our foreheads. **AV**

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A part, not apart