The Sacred as Immanent in a Sentient World

Session 4 of the 'Recovering the Sacred' online series, November 13, 2022

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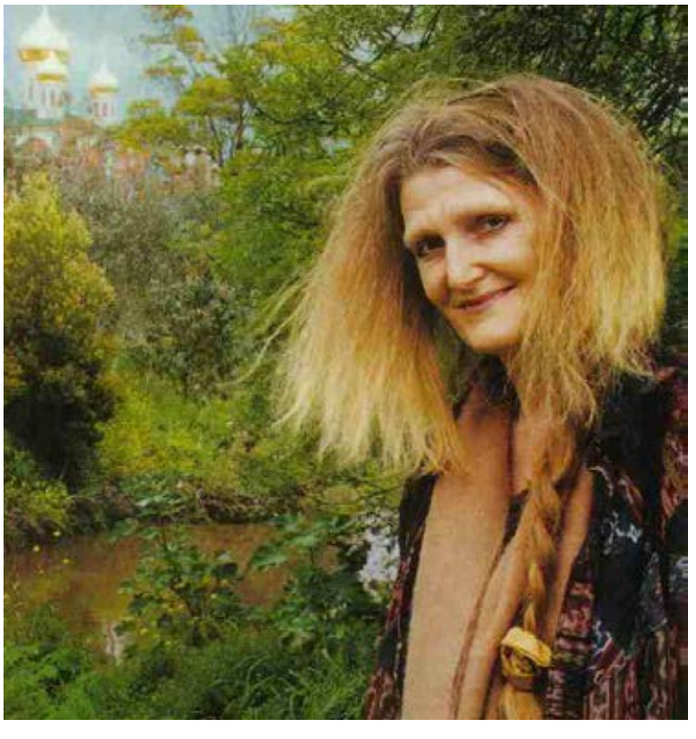
I will start by acknowledging the more-than-human world and the land into which we are all deeply integrated and the many beings both human and other-than-human that sustain us and bring us beauty. And I also want to acknowledge the damage that our civilization and culture have done to the land, the more-than-human, and indeed to the indigenous world.

The fields are misty as I walk towards the riverbank as dawn breaks. Birds are singing in the nearby wooded hillside and when I reach my spot, that narrow finger of land between the rivers Frome and Avon at their confluence, I pause to take in the light shimmering on the surface and the dark reflections of willow and alder that line the banks. I drop my bag and walking pole and I pause waiting for the moment to approach. And when the time seems right, I bow, imagining the boundaries of my separate self-softening and flowing out to become part of the wider whole. I introduce myself with my everyday medicine and sacred names and I call for teaching from the four directions. These ceremonial gestures serve to further separate me from the mundane and open myself to new encounters. And once I feel I've properly arrived I take out my flask of tea and breakfast cake and offer some to River as an Australian aboriginal elder might throw a small handful of sand into River to announce themselves as being there with meaningful intent. And then sitting quietly I try to clear my mind of rambling thoughts and offer River my attentive love.

'...that narrow finger of land between the rivers Frome and Avon at their confluence...' Top:.winter, above: summer

In his essay in the book *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on Earth as a Sacred Community* priest, geologian, cultural historian, Thomas Berry writes about the problems that arise in the West from our attachment to a transcendent perspective. And this attachment to a transcendent view, a view that takes us out of this earthly existence he argues, has contributed strongly to the anthropocentrism and radical dualism that splits the human from nature and male from female and so forth and leads to the rapacious violent and destructive civilization that we've developed, and on to the ecological catastrophe that faces the planet at present. But Berry argues throughout his work that the Sacred is not about transcendence. He describes his time as a monk in the Passionist order and how he came to see the Divine Office, chanting in Latin at daybreak, noon, afternoon, evening, and night, as a ritual that was part of, in his words, 'an age-old effort of humans to bring human life into accord with the great liturgy of the cosmos. That the universe was primary liturgy just as it was primary scripture, I never doubted.'



Top: Thomas Berry (1914-2009) was an American Catholic priest, cultural historian, scholar of the world's religions and a 'geologian.' Above: Freya Mathews (1947-) Australian environmental philosopher whose main work has been in the areas of ecological metaphysics and pansychism

My colleague philosopher Freya Mathews, an Australian philosopher, argues more specifically that the whole philosophical perspective of the West is rooted in transcendence since the Greeks. It's essentially representational and

> *it offers a view of the world that—being a view—is essentially* specular *in nature. Through the lens of such discourse, we look out at the world and imagine it as spread out passively for our epistemic gaze. We examine it, survey it, map it, we reflect on it, in an effort to work out how its parts and its aspects all fit together. We construct an abstract simulacrum that re-presents the world in a lens of theory. And throughout this process the* subject *remains the active party constructing again an abstract simulacrum in the inner theatre of its intellect, and the world as an abstract construct remains utterly passive, inert, two-dimensional. So theorizing itself creates the active subject and the passive object.*

Freya writes that from a panpsychic view, 'the aim is not to theorize the world but to relate to it, to rejoice in that relationship.'

Another person who has influenced me a lot recently is Amitav Ghosh and his extraordinary book *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*. He says—this is selected from several pages (pp. 195, 197, 204, 257):

> *The questions of who is a brute and who is fully human, who makes meaning and who does not, lie at the core of the planetary crisis. What if the idea that Earth teams with other beings who act, communicate, tell stories, make meaning, is taken seriously?*

A bit later he says:

> *This is the great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers and everyone else who's involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to non-humans. And as with all the most important artistic endeavors in human history, this is a task that is at once*

aesthetic and political and because of the magnitude of the crisis that besets the planet it's now freighted with the most pressing moral agency. As these events intensify, they add even greater resonance to indigenous voices, voices that have stubbornly continued to insist, in the face of unrelenting apocalyptic violence, that non-humans can, do, and must speak. It's essential now, as the prospect of planetary catastrophe comes ever closer, that those non-human voices be restored to our stories. The fate of humans and of all our relatives depend upon this.

I want to explore, as the title says, the sacred as immanent in the world, the world experienced as Gaia as a living cosmos, and while that search can be informed by ideas, it's primarily one of experience in practice. So what does it mean to live on earth as Gaia, that is to say, as a living vital entity in which many kinds of beings create meaning? Or a 'communion of subjects rather than a collection of objects' as Thomas Berry puts it? What does it mean not just to think about such a world but to deeply experience it and what does this imply for the recovery of the sacred?

There is a tradition in the West of panpsychism. It has a long and partly repressed history but it's coming back into some sort of fashion. And I'm not so much interested in the analytic panpsychism that is closely associated with consciousness studies but more in what we call living cosmos panpsychism, which is addressing ecological issues and is strongly articulated by Freya Mathews. She points out that the presuppositions and beliefs that we bring to our encounter with the world, act as a kind of invocation. They call up reality under particular aspects, so that this aspect or that aspect is drawn forth in the course of the encounter.

Freya adopts a radical starting point which draws strongly on Spinoza but also on Australian Aboriginal wisdom. She doesn't begin by thinking of a world of inanimate stuff and then wondering where mind might come from. She starts from the position of a panpsychic perspective, some kind of innerness and we can call this 'mood' or 'sentience' or 'subjectivity' or the 'will to self-realization.' Some kind of innerness is a fundamental aspect of matter, just as matter is a fundamental aspect of that innerness, all the way up and all the way down. Freya asks us to consider that the cosmos is One—a coherent field of mind-matter which constitutes a self-realizing and meaning-making system or being that has an interest in its own self-existence, indeed in its self-increase, in its evolution and self-expression. Meaning is in the cosmos right from the beginning because something that is self-aware means something to itself. And this one *Self* differentiates into

Below: Panpsychism is the view that all things have a mind or a mind-like quality. The word itself was coined by the Italian philosopher Francesco Patrizi in the sixteenth century and derives from two Greek words pan (all) and psyche (soul or mind). Right: fungal Mycelium growth

the many *selves*, self-realizing and self-reflexive beings—that's you and me, the oak trees and the polar bears, the algae and the mycelium, ecosysems and Gaia herself, all glorious yet temporary centres of meaning and action, all of whom return back in time from the one in which they arose. I'm reminded as I speak of Thomas Berry, who was asked, 'Where will you be when you die?' and answered, 'I'll be back in the cosmos where I always have been.'

These selves—you and me, oak trees—can be imagined as ripples or folds forming a dynamic fabric of ever-changing finite modes. Viewed from the outside, these modes appear as the entities as described in physics. From the inside they constitute a texture of ever-unfolding subjective presence and experience and these many are in themselves realizing with an interest in their own existence and increase. And so all beings, including the Earth, are integral to the fabric of the living cosmos, all of the same sentient cloth. We humans are part of a world that has depth as well as structure. And out of that a communicative order—an order of meaning—unfolds alongside the causal material order. The Many, as a community of subjects, reach out to each other in mutual contact and communication, co-creating a 'poetic ecology': the fundamental erotics of being touched by the world and touching it in return.

Poetics is not only a way of speaking about the world, it is also communicative engagement with the world. Freya calls this 'ontopoetics'—the poetics of being. The expression of meaning doesn't emanate only from the human side. The world is capable of—actively seeks—engagement with us, opening the possibility of a 'communicative encounter, of reciprocal presence, presence that *answers back* when our questions send out tentacles of attention in search of it.' And this is our experience: when we invoke a sentient presence, the world may grace us with a response. Of course this doesn't take place in human language; the world doesn't speak back to us. It's a poetic order conveying meaning in image and metaphor, in a language of things, a material language of things—animals and birds appear, the breeze ruffles the trees, cloud formations change in ways that are synchronous with our invitation. So the world is a place of enchantment, which literally means wrapped up in chant or song or incantation. Its subjectivity is rendered responsive to human invocation, not determined by human invocation.

Modern humans are perceptually alienated from this poetic order. If we conceive of a world as brute objects, it can only reveal itself to us as such. If we invoke a living presence, then we may receive a meaningful response—if we're open to it. And to quote Freya again:

> *To experience for ourselves the intimately apposite poetic responsiveness of place or landscape to our communicative overtures, of creek or river or mountain to our pilgrimage, is to be shifted in our metaphysical moorings. It is to feel graced, even loved, by the world and flooded with a gratitude, a loyalty, that rearranges in us the deepest wellsprings of desire.*

And all this leads to a profoundly significant re-understanding of ethics and morality. In the western worldview we have ethical responsibility to other sentient beings, which means humans and, at a stretch, some higher animals. And we are, as Mary-Jayne Rust pointed out yesterday, beginning to extend that. Freya's vision is that since there is an informing intelligence in the way things are, we should seek to align ourselves with this intelligence and act in accordance with it. Which is what most beings do. The point is not to understand the world but to encounter and rejoice in that experience. The challenge for a philosopher is not to think about the world but offer perspectives that enable us to live in the world. Quoting Aboriginal elders 'To know the world, we need to walk the land.'

Top: a group of Ngalop masked dancers from Bhutan, symbolizing different deities, demons and animals. The masks are used when the Ngalop act out spiritual stories from their collective past Above: 'To know the world, we need to walk the land.' The president of the Q'eros nation, descendants of the Inca in Peru, says, 'We still believe there should always be equal exchange, a sacred reciprocity we call ayni. *We Q'eros live close to nature and we sleep close to the earth. I want to protect it like it protects us*

This brings us to the practice of inquiry. In conversation with Freya, I began to see that the work I'd been doing these many, many years with action research, particularly Cooperative Inquiry, was a way of developing this sense of a deeper understanding of the panpsychic worldview. Cooperative Inquiry has three central characteristics that make it profoundly suitable for panpsychic inquiry because it treats all those human—and by extension other-than-human, more-than-human—as subjective self-directing beings and therefore as equal participants in the inquiry process. It also emphasizes the experiential ground form of knowing, and it asserts the primacy of practice.

In traditional research the roles of subject and researcher are mutually exclusive, the researcher contributes the thinking that goes into the project, the subjects contribute the action to be studied and the subjects may know nothing about the questions and the theory and the ideas that the researcher is actually up to.

In cooperative inquiry these exclusive roles are replaced by mutual relationships. All involved work together both as co-researchers and co-subjects. Everyone is engaged in the design and management of the inquiry. So everyone is talking about the questions that need to be asked and how we'll go about doing it, how we might gather experiential data and so on. Everyone also gets into the experience and action that's being explored. Everybody's involved in both the making sense and the drawing conclusions.

Experiential knowing brings our attention to bear on lived experience—this aspect of knowing that arises from face-to-face encounter with a person or a place or a being. Experiential knowing is essentially tacit, almost impossible to put into words, and it's often almost inaccessible to direct conscious awareness. It's the touchstone of the inquiry process and deepens as we engage in the cycles.

Presentational knowing then can be seen as the first clothing or articulation of experiential knowing. We 'tell the story,' or maybe make a sketch, of our experience, often bringing it into consciousness for the first time to ourselves and to others as we do so. Such a spontaneous narrative can then be intentionally articulated and developed through creative writing and storytelling, drawing, sculpture, movement, and dance, drawing on aesthetic imagery.

Propositional knowing then draws on concepts and ideas to make sense of and that may be generated from experience. It's the link between action research and scholarship. However, as I've said, propositional knowing of its own always has the danger of separating itself from experience and creating a world that exists in its own conceptual bubble. Propositional knowing is important, but it doesn't need to be separated off.

Top: in 2020 The Collaborative Inquiry in Vancouver brought together indigenous artists and arts educators who discussed the connections between the arts, and indigenous perspectives, and how teachers might go about integrating indigenous ways of knowing into their classrooms. Caption: Above: the Inquiry Participants wrote 'take aways' and 'give aways' on these leaves to solidify the learning in the session

Practical knowing is knowing how to—knowing in action. Practical knowing has a quality of its own, useful to an actor at the moment of action rather than to a disembodied thinker at the moment of reflection. At the heart of practical knowing is skilful doing, which may be beyond language and conceptual formulation.

These forms of knowing are brought to bear upon each other through the inquiry cycles to enhance their mutual congruence, both within each inquirer and the inquiry group as a whole. These cycles can be characterised as Apollonian—planned, thought through, logical; or they can be Dionysian—spontaneous, emotional, even wild.

A co-operative inquiry can start anywhere in the extended epistemology—with new experiences that call for investigation, with new practices that are demanded.

Often it starts with questions about practice expressed in propositional form—such as the summary of living cosmos panpsychism we have outlined above. Quality inquiry arises through the systematic—and also serendipitous—cycling through these ways of knowing.

Cooperative inquiry often starts with questions about practice, expressed in propositional form like the ones I'm putting forward: 'What would it really mean for us Westerners to take this idea of a sentient world, a world that actively seeks out attention, seriously?' So we have initiated a series of co-operative inquiries over the last four years—the 'we' is myself, Freya, Andreas Weber, who is a German biologist who writes and develops the idea of biopoetics, Sandra Wooltorton who is a relational ecologist working with Indigenous people in western Australia, and Stephan Harding who is resident ecologist at Schumacher College one of the leading proponents of Gaia theory. Originally we were going to Schumacher to work with the River Dart but Covid got in the way and so we translated that idea to an online experience. We've had two inquiries with Schumacher College and two that are independent. There's a full account of the first inquiry on my website 'Voicing Rivers Through Ontopoetics: A Cooperative Inquiry,' which is available at https://peterreason.net

Why River? Well it's partly serendipitous. It's partly because we were going to go to Schumacher College and the Dart called us. It's partly because each of the principals is working with rivers. Freya has written a long account of walking up the Merri Creek in Victoria for example and I've been walking down the River Avon for the last couple of years. Stephan Harding has fallen in love with a Wren Brook that runs through his land in Devon, and so forth. And it's partly because rivers are interesting complex beings—are they a being, are they a collection of beings? That is itself a really interesting kind of question.

Starting with the assumption of living cosmos panpsychism, we're engaged in cycles of inquiry. We've invited people to visit the rivers once a week to explore different approaches to invocation—loving attention, meditation, ceremony, song, gift-giving, and so on—and then to find an initial presentational form, writing or pictures or whatever, and post that account on Google docs. We read each other's accounts and then we meet once a week in the small group to share experiences and make sense together. Over time we begin to see different kinds of interesting questions and categories that we want to understand more deeply; and we build a practice together.

My own current practice is to go down to the river, as I say in my initial account (see above)—I bow, I introduce

Left: Andreas Weber (1967-) German biologist, biosemiotician, philosopher and journalist, with his daughter, Emma, in the forests of Varese Ligure, Italy. The area is famous for being one of Italy's earliest proponents of sustainable energy and organic agriculture. Below: Evening, Merri Creek, *Julian Ashton,1882, is reputedly the first true plein air painting done in Australia*

myself, open ceremonial space. Then I sit by River. I don't formally meditate. I try to keep my mind empty, then open myself to the presence of the place and notice all the different things that arise, without allowing myself to be caught by any one thing—for example, by this whirlpool streaming by, this birdcall, this shadow on the tree, this reflection. That seems to be a good way of not having too many expectations but being really open to what happens. This story comes from the very beginning of one of our inquiries:

> *Right from the start we were brought face-to-face with the destructive impact of contemporary society on the more-than-human world. Kathleen, driving on her first encounter with Tah-kee-os-tee, otherwise the French Broad in North Carolina, heard a loud crunch and, stopping the car, discovered to her horror that she'd run over a turtle, leaving it shattered but still alive. She wept over the broken body as she offered it back to River. Surely it was not pure chance that that very same week Ezekiel came across a turtle by the side of the road in Virginia, killed in the same manner. As they reported their experience back into the group reflection, we were all shocked and reminded of other occasions of violence towards the natural world. Remembering that Turtle Island is the North American name for the continent, Louisa reflected that symbolically the whole western consumerist society is crushing Turtle's back. The weight is just too much for the earth.*
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> *In the rest of the story Kathleen goes off to the Turks and Caicos Islands where she has a job as a conservation scientist to count turtles. It's very distressing because there aren't as many as there ought to be but at the end of three long days, they find some nests that the turtles have come out of and gone down into the sea. So they poke around in the nests to find out how many were left and they find at the bottom of the second one a baby live turtle that hasn't got out and wouldn't get out unless they helped it. They take it out and let it run down to the sea and back a couple of times so it gets oriented in the world and knows where to come back to if it manages to be a grown-up turtle. And then they take it out to sea. So there's a sense that the story comes all the way round.*

As we exchanged these experiences of violence, we wondered how we might make amends. As you can imagine, going out in this first cooperative inquiry and having this very confronting image of the crushed turtle, how could we respond? Reflecting on my own way forward, I remembered ceremonies of prostration that I learned on Buddhist retreats. I found myself wondering if I could include that in a ceremony of offerings to River—a full

Top: Tah-kee-os-tee or the French Broad River is a tributary of the Tennessee River that rises in the Blue Ridge Mountains, North Carolina. Middle: artistic interpretation of Turtle Island, a name for Earth or North America used by some indigenous peoples based on a common North American indigenous creation story. Bottom: sea turtles during nesting season

prostration of atonement. I developed all sorts of ways of thinking about this and I was overelaborating it—the way to find out was to actually go and do it. So I visited my old spot—which I use as part of the inquiry process—early one October Sunday morning.

I wake at six, dress warmly and make a flask of tea and a couple of flapjacks. The roads are dark and quiet. Arriving at my usual parking place, I take a few moments to centre myself and fully arrive before stepping out of the car. As I pull on my waterproofs, I notice the moon, just past full high and bright in a western sky, shining through a gap in the clouds. A planet and a handful of stars glimmer through the moon's brightness and, looking in the opposite direction, toward River, the sky is already brightening, showing just a touch of pink where the sun will soon be arising.

The world is almost silent around me as I cross the stone bridge over the river Frome, just water softly bubbling through the arches, the occasional chirrup of early birds. I unlatch the kiss gate into the field and walk across the grass toward River. The pink in the sky has turned to a purple bruise that stretches across the horizon. My moon shadow goes in front of me across the grass. Just being here with the soft light of the moon, the coloured sky, the palpable silence draws me away from everyday distraction into a deeper sense of the presence of the world and I reach my spot and I start the ceremonial gestures I've described before.

And when the time seems right, I bow and I have this sense of my separate self flying out to join the wider whole, an idea I got from David Hinton and his book Hunger Mountain. *Then I wait for the right moment to begin my prostrations. I'm still rather worried about this. The bank is steep and deep and muddy and even so early in the morning there will be dog walkers about. In conventional terms what I intend to do is quite ridiculous. But the place I'm standing slopes only gently down towards the water—flat and really not too wet for my prostrations. So following my experience and training from Buddhist retreats, I introduce myself again and take my next bow down into a full prostration, stretched across the grass.*

And this is what I find myself saying: 'River this is Peter. This is Wolfheart. Thank you for being here. Thank you for always being here. Thank you for being this place that I can come back to, with my friends, with my human friends. We've got more distressed at the damage we do, that this modern society does, that we are part of, complicit at this moment.' And at that moment an owl calls. I come this morning (the owl calls again), I come this morning to express this sorrow and to prostrate myself to you to show I'm open to your teachings. And a bird calls. I'm sorry. We are sorry. I prostrate myself and ask for teaching, asking how we can make amends, if *we can make amends. I feel my pulse beating on my solar plexus against the cool damp ground. And then I stand and I see the waters just a little brighter, the purple bruise extending across the sky. The Moon is still bright. The tail-lights of a car going up the hill catch my attention, a reminder of the everyday. Yet the owl calling seems to recognize my prayer, drawing me further into the sentient world. And I offer myself again. I bow and prostrate.*

And now I find myself worrying about whether I'm getting too muddy. As I stand, I'm filled with conflicting feelings: I'm offering myself through the prostrations, and I'm concerned about getting dirty, and I'm worried about whether I can get up and down elegantly at my advanced age, and whether I'm being too self-important in thinking that the owl is responding to me, and I'm simply reveling in this glorious morning.

The sky is noticeably lighter, there's just a touch of green on the willow across the water. And there's that owl again. I wonder how many prostrations I should do—three for the Buddhist tradition, four for the Medicine Wheel? I decide that two is quite sufficient for today and I scramble down the bank to be nearer to River and with my flask of tea and piece of flapjack I offer a little of each to River and settle down to watch and listen. And all the while the sky lightens, the purple fades, replaced by pink with

'The pink in the sky has turned to a purple bruise that stretches across the horizon.'

a bright orange glow across the horizon. I watch the eddies, the swirling patterns of turbulence that travel downstream to where they meet another line of eddies flowing out from the Frome, creating new patterns. And after a while I ask out loud: 'What is River's response to my prostration, to my asking how I could make amends?' Looking around I'm struck by the quality of beauty all around me. I feel enveloped in beauty.

For a moment a critical thought crosses my mind: Am I romanticizing? And at that very moment, Robin flies across from the willow stump, seeming to contradict the thought. I allow myself to sink deeper. What do I experience as I sit here with my cup of tea? I experience the most astounding, very simple beauty. Beauty in the eddies that keep going, always different always the same. Beauty in Robin's flight. Beauty in the way that little twig just dropped off the willow tree into the water. And then I find myself adding, 'Beauty in the sound of the swans' wings that have suddenly come up from behind me,' and I'm saying this before I'm consciously aware of that sound. My eyes are drawn upwards to see two swans flying from behind, east across the morning skies. Necks outstretched, wings beating, they fly across the river. Just as I think they're going to fly out of sight, they wheel around and fly right back over my head.

And I'm left sitting with my mouth open, amazed, almost stunned.

And then again, the critical voice comes back. 'Well this is what happens if you sit quietly in place for a while.' And at that moment the turquoise flash of a kingfisher seems to contradict that thought and I think: 'Was I pontificating at beauty? Was this romantic bullshit?' But more deeply I know I wasn't pontificating. I was enraptured. In the terms that we've used during these talks, this was a non-dual experience, simply being there. At that moment, precisely *at that moment the sounds of the swans came to my ears and they flew in this great circle over my head.*

I allow that realization to sink more deeply and I sit in my spot for a while more and my thoughts drift away. I find myself thinking about breakfast, about the book review I'm writing, I'm not present anymore, and I pull myself back and wonder if I should feel guilty, and then I realize it's over. This moment of astounding beauty and synchronicity has passed. I was here. I saw it. I was it and now everyday events press on my awareness. The cows walking across the field, the contrail torn through the sky by a jet, the traffic noise from the road. Full daylight has arrived and it's time to go. But as I return, I remember that resistance, the difficulty of finding the time to come down to River, getting out of bed in the dark, and that extraordinary moment with the moon shadow and the purple sky which seemed like a threshold into something, some space that was quite different when the world did seem to be responding to the owl call and the dramatically changing colours across the sky and the profound but simple beauty and the swans circling overhead.

Top: English Robin in flight Above: 'Two swans flying from behind, east across the morning skies.'

So, this is my image of the Sacred, as immanent, here on and in and with Earth, in the communion of beings, and in the cosmos as a whole. I was very taken with Mary Jayne's phrase yesterday, 'Being in attendance to Earth.' As we have pursued out inquiry some of us have increasingly used language that is traditionally religious: we find ourselves talking of prayer, of worship, of the sacred. Maybe it is our moral obligation to get out there in this sacred world, not to 'go into Nature' because it is 'good for us,' but go into the more-than-human world as a kind of a sacrament, so that we may re-align ourselves, and learn once again to be part of the communion of life on Earth.

Top: Kingfisher Above: River Frome

PETER REASON, as Director of the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath, England, was an international leader in the development of participative approaches to action research. In these forms of experiential inquiry all are co-researchers, contributing both to the thinking that forms the research and to the action that is its subject. He published widely, co-editing the *Handbook of Action Research: Participative Inquiry and Practice* and co-founding the journal *Action Research*.

Since retiring from his academic position, Peter has focused on writing that links the tradition of nature writing with the ecological crisis of our times, drawing on scientific, ecological, philosophical and spiritual sources. He is currently engaged in a series of experiential and co-operative inquiries exploring living cosmos panpsychism in relation to Rivers. His books include *Spindrift: A wilderness pilgrimage at sea*; *In Search of Grace: An ecological pilgrimage,* and most recently (with artist Sarah Gillespie) *On Presence: Essays | Drawings* and *On Sentience: Essays | Drawings.* He is currently preparing *Living in a Sentient World: An inquiry* with his colleagues Freya Mathews, Andreas Weber, Stephan Harding, and Sandra Wooltorton.

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