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from *The Trumpeter*, 3(4) (1986)
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THE PRINCIPLE OF EXTENDED IDENTITY

1. Pantheism is not a religion. It has no fixed dogma or system of worship. Rather, it is a call to worship, or at least an appeal to mindfulness and gratitude for life. Since it relishes the possibilities of life, pantheism is expressed in a diversity of practices; but they share the central recognition that a spirit/power/life-force is present in all things, including us, and that our identities are inextricably entwined with lives beyond our own. That is not only the premise of pantheist thought, but also the basis of poetry, music, healing, and love.

"The childish heresy of Pantheism" Pope John called it. Childish, one assumes, in the sense of not knowing any better, a kind of fusion of credulous innocence and deliberate ignorance, this notion that an owl or a woodrat or a wild rose are possessed of life-spirits, of identities essential to our own. One constant revelation of the historical process has shown that when great religious personages die, the sun continues, the moon holds fast, the wind still blows in the cottonwood trees, the seeds scatter, the water flows. Not knowing any better.

2. A basic principle of pantheism is that of extended identity. This principle holds that to know one's self you must be able to sense, establish, and sustain relationships beyond the self. It assumes you cannot separate the dancer from the dance.

The extension of identity is a way to explore what makes us possible. It seeks life beyond and within our own. Lovers. Friends. Owls. Bobcats. Saxifrage. Sun. Moon. The Seven Moons of the Lost Island. The Nine Red Moons of Shalimar. The moon on the water, spilling. It seeks the pattern of connections and the resonance of associations. It makes distinctions in order to assimilate the differences. It would enlarge the dance.

3. I cannot define identity. However, I feel any sufficient definition would have to include the following aspects of its larger dynamic:

Genetic (from general species to particular parents)

Cultural (the influence of the social environment; prevalent thought-forms and beliefs; mediation of species and ecosystem)

Planetary (the sum of physical sustenance: earth, air, water, light, and every other species)

The "I" (our consciousness of our self, variously conceived; who we think we are)

Relational (the entirety of relationship between the I and everything else)

According to legend, Buddha went to a shrine to make obeisance to his parents. There, he realized, "Every person and other sentient being who has ever lived in the countless Kalpas of time are, in effect, my parents."

What makes us possible must certainly be part of what we are.

4. Identity, to gouge a distinction, is a bi-polar dynamic: the need to assert the self (definitional) and the need to surrender the self (integrative). Both forces can be simultaneously in effect, both are important, and both are capable of infinite expression. Timing is the skill; knowledge the tool. Knowledge cannot be separated from the self or the other-like love, it is an evolving covenant of permissions, plagued by fear and ignorance, sustained by faith.

The pantheist faith assumes everything is as important as ourselves. Not more. Not less.

5. The practices used for extending identity are richly diverse and have been developed and employed from the Paleolithic to the present, most notably in the Great Spirit/shamanism tradition and, with a more metaphorical predication, in early alchemical works. Despite their diversity, most practices share a simple tenet: Pay Attention. Attune the mind with attention. Attend the relationships and associations alive among the self and other forms of life. Use imagination to explore the binding curve that joins us together. Develop a firm grasp of the obvious. Not a grasping at all, really, since the attentive mind is like an open hand.



To experience the sense of extended identity, a good place to start is with our basic physical interdependence with planet and place. One common practice, expressed in many forms, involves daily attention/meditation on the Four Elements: Earth, Air, Water, and Fire (or sunlight, both direct and reflected from the moon). These are not ideas or metaphors; they are real, and each in a specific time and place has a quality, a character, that carries further into us than mere nutrition. Of course, they are generally taken for granted; most humans pay them no particular mind as they go about their business. In the pantheist view, since these elements make our existence possible, such mindlessness displays a hideous lack of gratitude. Only fools ignore or seek to transcend the conditions of life.

6. The extension of identity should not be confused with what psychiatrists call projection. Projection imposes the self on the other in an attempt to contain or control it; essentially it is the imagination in the service of rationalization, justification, and distorted self-defense. The extension of identity, on the other hand, seeks to know the other, join it, and thereby withdraw it from projection. The spirit refined by addition.

7. The extension of identity doesn't involve the loss of the ego. The Freudian topography of the human psyche delineates three major regions of function: the ego, which mediates self and other; the super-ego, which mediates species and ecosystem; and the id, which mediates the heart and the journey. The extension of identity doesn't require the loss of any psychic element, but rather necessitates a transformation of them all. Since this transformation is different for each individual, no example is adequate. Simply put, you must be convinced a transformation has taken place.

In the pantheist view, it is a mistake to limit the self (or "I") to the ego, or to any one aspect of the psyche. The danger of egocentricity is precisely that the psyche has no center. The psyche is an awesomely complex system of energy interchanges, a considerable number of which are under the continual influence of exterior forces, most obviously those of culture and the constitutive physical reality of the planet. We like to think we understand these other forces, but our solipsistic explanations and heedlessly destructive actions indicate that such is a delusion. The self is no doubt a reality, but only one among many. To gain a more complete access to the living mind, the *spiritus mundi*, one must seek the conclusions among realities—I and others, light and waves, the moon and the owl. The shaman woman becomes an owl in order to better understand the moon, her villagers, her child, her lover. She becomes the owl so that her heart might fly away.

8. Our cultural life is increasingly dominated by two interlocking social forms: one, a corporate global technocracy that reduces existence to commodities and markets; the other, a liberal totalitarianism where everything not prohibited is compulsory. Both reflect a greed to dominate and control. Some semblance of control—hopefully by covenant, rather than imposition—is probably necessary socially, and biologically it is already there, if dimly understood. But when the desire to control sickens with greed it becomes heartless domination, and as we're robbed of our capacity for freedom, we lose our capacity for faith. The source of domination, I think, is not a fear of death, but rather the fear of life. I've always liked St. Augustine's definition of love: "I want you to be." It acknowledges the relationship between freedom and faith by accepting a reality beyond the self. As that acceptance deepens and includes more, it is easier to resist domination by others as well as the desire to dominate others yourself.

9. Although it may be something of a sociological cliché, I think the current cultural fit of egocentricity is primarily a response to the isolation caused by displacement. In the relatively brief industrial age we have increased our mobility so much we are seldom really anywhere. (The idea behind franchises, for example, is to make everywhere the same.) This increased mobility has slowly resulted in a monotonous homogenization of American culture, a state of mind strongly abetted and sustained by the centralization of information and information sources—the same information from fewer and fewer sources, almost

all of it channeled through media originating beyond our immediate locale. It becomes increasingly difficult to judge the quality of the information, apply its substance, or trust its reliability. In the electronic global village, we're everywhere at once, but in actual sensual fact, we're not any where at all. Place becomes space, the final homogenized degradation of home, another disposable commodity.

"Be Here Now" is a lame injunction if there is no sense of here, if it is just the current condition of space. To have an identity or self in any lively sense of the word means understanding the contingencies of other identities and appreciating the relations connecting life to life. To seek such an understanding requires concentration in much the same way that flowers require roots. Identity is not an airy generalization; it is grounded in the specifics of daily living, the solid particulars, blood and soil and sun. The only way to grasp this is to live somewhere long enough to attend the complexity of living relationships. You can't fuck on a dead run. You can't join the owl's spirit by watching it on the *Wide World of Animals*. You can't appreciate the seasonal qualities of moonlight without spending those seasons with the moon.

Time is a function of place. If you seek the owl's spirit, you have to see one every once in awhile, and to see one you must learn where to look and how to wait. You can't do that at 55 miles per hour on the freeway; can't talk to one on the C.B. Place encourages patience. You see it over and over again until you really begin to see it. And in doing it, you learn what is involved in that doing—the landforms and plants and watercourses, where the wild pigs hide out on hot summer afternoons, the likelihood of rain in May.

Here is the place to look if you are looking for anything more important than a bigger paycheck or your name in lights. There has been a recent surge of Industrial Mysticism among the hipper techno-elite who think it would be the "natural" extension of the "human adventure" to create space colonies where people could live in controlled, self-sustaining environments and explore new forms of social relationship. I think they would all be stone-fucking-crazy within a year, not just because of the rat-cage mentality they would take with them, but because they would miss the hundreds of subtle planetary cues the Earth provides the human organism: scents; changes in the quality and duration of light; magnetic shifts; cloud formations; a sense of horizon and panorama scaled to our neural coherence—those, and a hundred others, and probably twice that many that we don't even suspect. The planet—and more specifically, the place we live on it—is our main source of spiritual and biological information, and to do without it for any length of time would affect us in much the same way that starvation influences morality.

It seems to me that a watershed offers the ideal neural and social scale for the exploration of human identity; it is complete enough to yield a pattern of relationships, and large enough to be inexhaustible. Practiced in place (which is almost indispensable to its practice) the extension of identity becomes the realization of community, and as place turns into home, the heart opens like a seed.