

# **The Boundaries of Experiencing Freedom**

*Boundary crossings and boundary shifts in changing times*

**Wim Bonis**

## **Yearning for holidays and being together**

It is striking that the relaxation of the corona measures in the summer of 2021 in many Dutch people have triggered two different ways of experiencing freedom. In order to break out of isolation, on the one hand they appear to experience that freedom by being able to go on holiday abroad again, and on the other hand by being able to be together again with many other people close to each other.

Let me start with the first. Closing the national borders and other more local restrictions on freedom of movement during the corona crisis have triggered a growing need for spatial freedom among many. The long-term restrictions due to the coronavirus have ensured that our sense of freedom has (once again) become strongly associated with the possibility of being able to move to places beyond our national borders without any hindrance. When the measures in this area were relaxed, this resulted in a huge catch-up race with regard to booking holidays abroad. During the corona crisis, a lot of thought was given to and written about rediscovering our own environment and beautiful places in the Netherlands. Many people, myself included, put it into practice by going for walks and cycling in the immediate environment, and took a good look at the surrounding nature and culture – which turned out to be much more unknown and impressive than you had ever imagined. I assume it has not been much different in other countries. I sincerely hope that this blossomed love for the nature and culture of one's own region or country will not disappear due to our strong longing for holidays abroad.

The second form of experiencing freedom is related to the fact that we can finally be physically together with many other people again. After spending a lot of time indoors with few people due to the restrictive corona measures, many people in the Netherlands had a deep longing to physically join a large crowd. The terraces had already been expanded considerably during the corona crisis, and when the restrictive corona measures were relaxed, the terraces filled up quickly like never before. In the inner cities, people seemed to enjoy to the fullest simply walking back and forth through the shopping streets. When some festivals were allowed to be held again – for a short while anyway –, there was a real rush on the tickets. The revival of the ‘Orange fever’ because of the European Championship football, which coincided exactly with the relaxation of the corona measures, can also be placed in this context – as well as the deeply felt disappointment when this form of physical togetherness was suddenly taken away by the loss of the Dutch Orange team against the team from the Czech Republic. I think that the increased popularity of populist movements, and political parties calling on ‘freedom of expression’ to give them a voice, also tie in with the increased need for security – with the increased need for confirmation and even reinforcement of existing boundaries, and the sense of identity associated with it.

So, for many people the experience of freedom is expressed on the one hand by a strong longing to cross national borders – to be able to leave the familiar behind for a while and travel abroad; and on the other hand, by being physically close together within the boundaries – clinging to the familiar, holding onto clear boundaries. I suspect that these rather contradictory needs can often reside in one and the same person. Sometimes it turns out that these things can go well together, when the Dutch (or people with another nationality) visit each other in the holiday parks and the campsites abroad, and on the terraces and the beaches. And I think that no one is completely free from this, including myself. In order to gain some insight into this, in this article I will try to outline the broadest possible picture of our experience of freedom and the role that crossing and shifting boundaries play in this.

## **Boundary-crossing behavior**

The longing to cross boundaries, and to guard and strengthen those boundaries, naturally concerns not only the physical borders of countries, but also the mental boundaries: crossing or holding onto the elusive, invisible boundaries that only exist in our heads. As I will argue below, I think that is where the greatest challenge lies today, but it is also a trajectory where there are some dangers lurking. In the Netherlands the term ‘boundary-crossing behaviour’ has been given a negative aura by the #MeToo movement: we have all become deeply convinced in recent years that we need to watch out in the sexual realm in order not to be guilty of this type of behavior. It has become unacceptable behaviour. And the corona virus that managed to cross the boundary between the animal and human world, has actually further confirmed this negative status and danger of boundary-crossing behaviour.

When it comes to violent forms of crossing borders and boundaries, then in the Western world (and elsewhere) we also have a long history of conquerors, imperialists and settlers who have practiced this with great regularity and for a long time. These violent border and boundary crossings did take place in the physical world, but they very clearly first originated in the minds of the perpetrators, and therefore in the culture of which they were a part. While these kinds of conquests and colonizations still happen today, I think they are the last throes of a patriarchal mentality driven by an urge for dominance over others. We can see that in many countries the colonial past is being examined. In the Netherlands a growing number of people insist to correct the history books with regard to the contribution to the slave trade, and for some years the ‘black pete’ tradition has come under fire. Also the art objects in the museums are investigated: when they are identified as ‘looted art’, they must be given back to the country of origin.

In any case, the focus in this article is not on these types of border or boundary crossings, where the *freedoms of others* are violently infringed. The boundary crossings and shifts I focus on in this article are careful, caring and respectful ways of crossing and shifting that we realize primarily *in ourselves*, avoiding the harmful effects on others, and – in a larger context – on the entire living environment, as much as possible. In other words, my experience of freedom is not separate from the experience of freedom of others and from Nature, in which we are completely embedded

and on which we are still completely dependent. Elsewhere, in my English blog *An embedded freedom of speech*, I have called this kind of freedom experience *embedded freedom* in a different context.<sup>1</sup>

### **Natural boundaries**

In connection with the longing for and desirability of border crossings and border shifts, it is useful to make a distinction between natural and artificial boundaries. It goes without saying that humans have made no, or only a minimal, contribution to the existence of natural boundaries. These natural boundaries exist both in space and in time. In space, there are boundaries in the landscape created by nature itself, including coasts, riverbanks, mountain ranges, and the interface between the earth below our feet and the sky above. Those boundaries are always fluid and open, places of constant interaction. Even without the influence of climate change they have been shifted regularly by nature itself due to changing sea levels, changing riverbeds, earthquakes, and so on. Through conscious human intervention, these boundaries can sometimes be shifted slightly, by building dykes and digging canals, as has been the case with the landscape of the Netherlands for centuries – and still is the case today.

At first glance, there is a clear spatial and material boundary between my body and the environment in which my body is located. But the line becomes more difficult to draw when we take into account the continuous interaction with the environment, in the form of breathing, drinking and eating. And we must not forget that the egocentric sense of separation, which is still widespread in the Western world and has roots going back thousands of years in history, has added an important artificial component.<sup>2</sup>

When we take a look at the time dimension, we come across the natural boundaries between night and day, between sleeping and being awake, and between winter and summer, and so on. In this time dimension, these boundaries are shifted and crossed almost imperceptibly, from a daily to an annual context, in an ongoing process of cyclical movement. An incessant process of change that was beautifully depicted by the Taoist yin/yang symbol thousands of years ago.

### **Artificial boundaries and borders**

Artificial boundaries are conceived and created by humans: they always originate in the human mind. I already mentioned in this connection the egocentric sense of separation that has caused us to add artificial boundaries to the already existing natural boundaries. When artificial boundaries are projected onto the material world, as is the case with country borders, they can sometimes coincide with natural boundaries: a coastline or riverbank can also mark a political border. In time, natural boundaries, between night and day and between the seasons, can also be marked artificially: since the invention of the mechanical clock, we know exactly when the night begins and when it is noon, but the natural changes between night and day keep shifting constantly; since time immemorial we have artificially marked the transition of the seasons with all kinds of festivals and rituals, but when, for example, it is midwinter in the northern hemisphere, it is midsummer in the southern hemisphere, and in the tropics it is never winter.

Most of the artificial boundaries, however, are rather elusive and invisible, and are completely separate from the natural boundaries: they mark all kinds of distinct and separated areas that only exist in our heads. For example, we have drawn artificial boundaries between different scientific disciplines, between what is science and what is not, between different nationalities, between different levels of education, between different professions, between different religions, between history and prehistory, between civilization and barbarism, between culture and nature, between work and leisure, between reality and fantasy, and between nature and the supernatural. Ironically, we've drawn an artificial boundary between what we consider natural and what we consider artificial.

We may not always realize that by creating an artificial boundary we are simultaneously laying a foundation for both a *dualistic field of tension* and a *hierarchical order* between the two areas we are trying to keep separate from each other. Sometimes the boundaries between such areas seem to have a natural basis, like those between women and men, between humans and animals, between heterosexuals and homosexuals. But those boundaries become mainly artificial when they are regarded as absolute dichotomies, and fixed qualities and characteristics are ascribed to both sides. As said before, natural boundaries are always fluid and open. That the boundaries between humans and animals are basically fluid and open has once again

become clear when in 2019 the corona virus manage to jump from bats to humans – and later sometimes manage to jump back to the animals, as has been the case with minks.

Crossing the invisible artificial boundaries is more difficult than it seems, because we have created them ourselves to divide things in an orderly manner, and we have based them on the idea that they contribute to our protection. They divide and protect the heritage of nations, scientific disciplines, the views of political parties and our religious beliefs. They also protect our ideas about human history, about what we consider civilized and what isn't, about what we consider natural and what isn't. They also protect the structure of hierarchical organizations with their exclusive levels, which should correspond with the supposed contribution that they have to the development of our society: the largest contribution from the top and the smallest contribution from the bottom.

### **Crossing artificial (country) borders**

As said earlier, for many people crossing the country borders is an important way to express their experience of freedom. Interestingly, the process of actually crossing a national border shows us very clearly how insignificant such an artificial border really is. Of course, it is possible to mark that border with a high wall, and to guard it with a border patrol, but this does not alter the fact that natural life on both sides of the border usually is not any different. The architecture may differ slightly from country to country, as well as the infrastructure, the language, the laws and the customs of the people. But the landscape, the animals, plants and also the people on the one side and on the other generally show continuity. If there would not have been a wall and a border patrol post, no one would have noticed any significant change while passing the border. By simply crossing a national border and taking a good look around you, you can become aware that the differences between the two nationalities on both sides of the border are largely imagined.

We must never forget that animals and plants do not care at all about our national borders. The seeds of plants fly where they want to go, aided by the wind or by birds, and pass unseen from one country to another. The life of birds and fish often takes place on a planetary level, and they are known to sometimes travel great distances during their lives. However much we even

have extended our national borders underwater and in the air, and have divided those spaces into national zones (in order to appropriate the life that dwells therein): the fish remain free to swim through the seas and oceans, the birds remain free through flying in the air, and these days more and more foxes and wolves also pass the national borders unhindered. They don't need passports or residence permits, and they go where they want. They don't need our urge to experience freedom at all.

Just as actually crossing the national border can make us aware of its limited meaning, so can a similar awareness be realized by carefully crossing the boundary of what we consider 'scientific', 'civilized', 'religious', 'rational' or 'natural'. Perhaps the area on the other side isn't as different as we thought, and we've only kept the idea of a big difference going by staying within the safe confines of our own area.

### **The Motherland and the Fatherland**

With regard to the borders between countries, it is good to realize that the natural boundaries and artificial borders correspond to the different conceptions we have of the land in which we are living our lives. We can experience the land in two different ways: as a Motherland or a Fatherland. The experience of the Motherland is absolutely the oldest, as old as humanity. It concerns the experience of being embedded in a landscape, the feeling of being part of an organic whole that always envelops us, and that extends from the immediate environment to Mother Earth and beyond. The Motherland has only natural boundaries. The Fatherland is of a much later date, and goes back to the establishment of patriarchal societies – a process that has begun about 4000 years before the Common Era. This was also the moment when our sense of separation (from the natural world and from other people), as the basis for the development of Western society, began to take shape. In the Motherland people felt they belonged to the land, and in the Fatherland these roles were reversed, and the land was considered to belong to humankind: the land was divided into landownership of many different people. The Fatherland is the imagined country with which we have come to identify ourselves politically, the national state that makes us feel Dutch, German, Belgian, and so on. Certain cultural matters are linked to the Fatherland, and also the flag and the national anthem. On a more local level, it can also be expressed by strongly identifying oneself with a specific

city or town, by considerably enlarging the cultural differences from the neighbouring cities. If the Motherland connects a person with the whole of existence, then the Fatherland divides the people into limited substitutes for the whole, into groups that often find themselves in a dualistic struggle. The Motherland mothers as an overarching organism over all living beings, and includes both the human and *the more-than-human world* (in the terminology of David Abram)<sup>3</sup>; the Fatherland has meaning only for the human world, and quite often this is even limited to a small part of this human world.

The Motherland is very concrete Presence. The Fatherland is just an abstract idea – a wafer-thin, limited reflection of this Presence of the Motherland. Talking in terms of Alfred Korzybsky: if the Motherland exists at the level of the territory, the country itself, then the Fatherland exists at the level of the map. Unfortunately, it is true that in our Western society the various Fatherlands have come to pretend to fully represent the Motherland (of which there is only one!). In fact, in our current society the attention has shifted almost completely to the Fatherland, and we hear very little about the Motherland. Connectedness is presented as a phenomenon that only deals with the connection between certain groups of people. What is not said is that this only concerns connection in a Fatherland context.

Connection in a Motherland context includes a connection to the more-than-human world of the animals, the plants, earth, water and air – in fact, to the entire living landscape, in which we are embedded, and which nourishes us. In this context, the connection between people only exists by virtue of the connection with the more-than-human world. In other words, we need to work on improving and deepening our relationships with the more-than-human world before we focus on interpersonal relationships. Viewed from a Motherland context, focusing exclusively on improving interpersonal relationships, without taking into account the overarching more-than-human world in which our lives are embedded, lacks an essential basis. In our current Fatherland context, we have lost sight of the fact that the human world is always being healed from the more-than-human world (and not the other way around!). We would do well to provide space for this beneficial form of boundary crossing!

We should realize that the Motherland is not limited to the visible, tangible world of matter: an important part of Her being, in fact, the most

important part, is residing in an invisible dimension. Just like is the case with any other living being, including ourselves, this is what makes Her alive and also gives the Sacred quality to the landscape. We experience this Sacred quality and invisible dimension of a landscape, when we are overwhelmed unexpectedly by an experience of *awe*. For a moment we let go of our sense of control, our heart and mind open up, and we are filled with a deep sense of mystery. This can happen on a large scale, when we are confronted by a majestic view, during a hike, but also on a tiny scale, when we come across an unfamiliar plant, a wonderful flower, an untraceable scent, or a strange little insect. It can happen in your own backyard or on your balcony, when you sit down to have a cup of tea.

I think our lack of attention to the natural invisible boundaries – not only to those invisible boundaries in the natural world around us, but also to those that mark the stages of our individual development throughout our lives – indicates a loss of contact with the Motherland. It is conceivable that this loss of contact has also prompted us, modern Western people, to create all kinds of artificial invisible borders. But these are, as I indicated earlier, very different kinds of boundaries: they are not meant to be crossed. They are designed to provide security, protection, and to categorize groups of people and nations according to collective labels — which aim to keep some people within its borders and boundaries, and to keep others out. They may not be directly intended to generate conflict and struggle, but unfortunately they do.

### **Substitutes and the awakening process**

I think that the longing to go on holiday abroad and to be with many other people on terraces, in cafes and at festivals are two phenomena that have something important in common. They indicate our lost contact with the Motherland, a loss has been so general and so deeply forgotten that we don't even remember it anymore. As we have seen, this loss did not occur yesterday, and even has quite a long history of thousands of years. This loss has been expressed once by the concept of Paradise Lost. In my view, and of some other researchers, Paradise is a mythical representation of life in pre-patriarchal times, when we still felt deeply connected to the surrounding natural world, with the more-than-human world. In short, when we still felt completely embedded in the Motherland.

As as long as people keep identifying with their sense of separation, they will also experience a vague feeling that they are missing something essential in their lives. They yearn to fill this lack. By staying in an idealized location abroad, accompanied by a lot of sunshine and alcoholic drinks, or by feeling included in a large group of people, they hope – subconsciously – to rediscover some of that lost paradise feeling, of that deep connection with life. But because, due to that sense of separation, the path to the original has completely disappeared from their view, they have been looking for it in the wrong place. The stay in the holiday place, on the terrace and the festival turn out to be only substitutes. And despite the copious amounts of sunshine and alcoholic beverages, these substitutes will never be able to make up for this vague, deeply experienced sense of lack.

To restore our deep connection to the surrounding natural world, to the more-than-human world, nothing less than a change of consciousness is required, an awakening process that transforms our experience of reality from within our heart and our hara center. As long as such an awakening process has not been realized, the holiday place, the terrace and the festival will continue to attract us and the visits to them will have to be repeated again and again. This awakening process, which can only be generated individually in our own local environment, heals our sense of separation and of lack. From within our heart and hara center, new life is breathed into our connection with surrounding life, in the broadest sense of the word. Then we start realizing again that our local environment – even if it is located in an urban area – is, relatively speaking, only populated for a very small part by (fellow) human beings.

### **Rediscovering the local environment**

I think this awakening process has already been triggered by many people during the corona crisis. When we were forced to spend a lot of time in the immediate environment due to the restrictive corona measures, I felt – and many others as well – that new life was breathed into my connection to the Motherland: as said earlier, during the corona crisis I took another good look at everything I was familiar with around me, and came to realize that it often turned out to be much less familiar than I had long thought. I discovered many new things, walking paths I didn't know that were there, trees in the park that I never seemed to have seen before. I seem to smell the

many different smells in a more intense way. I came *face to face* with natural processes of change that suddenly turned out to be completely mysterious again, following developmental patterns we will never fully understand. Actually, I realized once again that next to face-to-face relationships, there are also *face to place* relationship between us and the natural environment, as has been suggested by the anthropologist Keith Basso. While researching the Apache community Cibeqe, he noticed that the places had a special personal meaning for them. By using the term *face-to-place* he wanted to stress that for these people the local places had a personality comparable to their own, and that the relationship between them and these places was reciprocal in nature.<sup>4</sup>

As children we have all known that the local places we spent our time in had a personality with which we related in a reciprocal way. The corona crisis offered us an opportunity to look again with the uninhibited look of a child and to see the new and the always self-renewing processes around us. Although I live in an urban environment, I experienced – beyond the houses, the noises of traffic and the voices of people – the presence of the larger context of Nature; of the more-than-human world in which our individual lives and human society are always embedded. Beyond everything, I experienced a powerful Nature that is always moving and changing, and that – despite the disasters in the form of floods, droughts, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and even in the form of a virus like Covid 19 – essentially She is kind to us: Mother Nature who like any mother will always keep taking care of her children.

Of course, the longing for a holiday abroad is also easy to understand. Every now and then I feel that longing as well. I don't want to deny that a trip to a new area can break the routine of being in the same environment for a long time, and that being confronted with unknown landscapes and unknown culture can trigger something important in the mind. It can provide valuable, mind-blowing experiences, groundbreaking inspiration, a new outlook on life. But I think the time of the corona crisis has shown us that it is very important to learn to cross artificial boundaries without having to move elsewhere. Due to habituation we tended to no longer see the unknown and miraculous in our own living environment. In this connection, the German philosopher Hegel once eloquently emphasized that the familiar, precisely because it is familiar, remains unknown to us.<sup>5</sup> But as I

have pointed out above, by simply taking another good look at our familiar environment, it turns out to be much not so familiar at all. Rediscovering the unfamiliar in our own environment shows us that we do not need to travel far or go abroad to be able to cross or shift boundaries. It can be also done by staying at home. In fact, this opening up to the unfamiliar in the direct environment has been helping us a lot in making us *feel more at home!*

There are tourists who come to the area and the town where I am living, and they still seem to experience the unknown and wonderful in it. They take photos of views and buildings that I have often passed by without taking too much notice. That is because they see something new and unfamiliar. If for a moment we manage to follow in the footsteps of visiting tourists, this can help us to come into contact again with newness and unfamiliarity that is still present in your own familiar environment. So, look around you and imagine that you are here on holidays, on your first day in a new place. Importantly, the term *holidays* still contains memories of pilgrimages. Go on a pilgrimage to your own environment; turn your day into a true Holy Day! This way, you can become more aware again of the Motherland in which you are living your life all the time.

I have become aware that – since we have been given more freedom of movement due to the relaxation of the corona rules – that a revived, innate openness to everything, and the associated curiosity about everything that comes our way, should not be lost again. Now that national borders have opened up more and more to tourism, and many people feel a strong urge to travel abroad, we have to watch out that this does not happen.

### **Restoring the balance**

Crossing and shifting the artificial boundaries has everything to do with restoring balance in our daily lives. In order to restore that balance, individually and collectively, it is important that in a general sense we *consciously* shift and cross boundaries on a regular basis – both natural and artificial boundaries. With regard to the natural boundaries we are passing all the time – such as the ones we are passing through, when we go from being awake to being sleep and back to being awake; when we move through the different seasons; or when we move through our individual phases of development – we need to become more aware of the presence of

these invisible boundaries and of the transition process that goes with them. In fact, it is a rediscovery: we have largely lost awareness of those transitional moments in modern Western culture, and we would do well to retrieve this lost cultural heritage and give it a fully respected place again. Even the annual transitional moments of Christmas and Easter have become estranged from their original meaning: after all, they have only been linked quite late to some specific events in the Bible, events that took place far away in another country around 2000 years ago, by which the local experience of the seasonal changes in the here and now had faded into the background.

Fortunately, in recent years more and more attention has been paid to the more place-specific experience of the transitional moments as they had been handed down from the pre-Christian 'nature religions'. So before the corona crisis hit the world, the pre-Christian natural religions, powered by nature religions from indigenous culture from all over the planet, had already begun to renew our contact with surrounding natural world. In this respect, the more intense experience of Nature during the crisis, about which I spoke earlier, continued a trend that had already begun before it.

If we want to restore the balance, it is also very important to no longer be hindered by the artificial boundaries that we have imposed on ourselves. Historians, for example, should not limit their research to consulting other respected historians, and should not only familiarize themselves with prehistoric research, but also expand their knowledge from areas such as mythology and psychology. Philosophers should not cling to the ideas advanced by the classical philosophers, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel, or even to the ideas of more recent philosophers such as Sartre and Foucault — but they should reconsider the idea of what philosophy actually is about and also take other modern thinkers outside their field seriously. Academic researchers should not limit themselves to academic research, but should be open to and interested in research by 'laymen': the boundary between what is considered science and what is not, should be constantly questioned by them. Numerous developments, actually from the beginning of the materialistic form of scientific practice in the 17th century, but especially in the last decades, have already shown that the boundary between them has never really been fixed and has constantly shifted. Politicians should not only listen and agree with members of their own

party, but should open their minds to the ideas of other parties — even appreciate and learn from them — and explore areas beyond politics. Furthermore, I think it is good for each individual to consider for himself where you draw the line between what is considered work and what is free time; between what is considered reality and what is considered fantasy; between what is considered natural and what is supernatural, and whether those boundaries should be shifted a bit. This can be done by asking yourself questions, such as: 'Don't myths and dreams reflect reality?' 'Do phenomena such as telepathy and clairvoyance really belong to the supernatural or are they not simply natural?' And so on.

### **Near-death experiences and space experiences of astronauts**

With regard to crossing and shifting boundaries, we can learn a lot from people with special experiences. I am thinking in this connection of the people who have had near-death experiences and of the astronauts who have had experiences in space. It may seem a bit far-fetched to include these here, but I think these special experiences are making an important contribution to the process of crossing and shifting boundaries in our time. I also think it is no coincidence that we are confronted with these kinds of experiences in our time. It is known to me that near-death experiences are often still viewed with suspicion and are being 'explained away' as mere hallucinatory experiences by materialist scientists. Therefore, opening the mind to this phenomenon can already be an act of crossing and shifting boundaries!

The near-death experiences have actually always been there, but due to the current improvements in the medical field, they have often been given the opportunity to act. Since the 1970s, many books and articles have been written about it.<sup>6</sup> The space experiences of astronauts have only been around for a few decades. These experiences have been written less often and extensively than about the near-death experiences, but many astronauts have reported on their special experiences.<sup>7</sup> For both, modern scientific technology has made an important, if not essential, contribution to making these specific experiences possible, but development in the technical field was certainly not aimed at generating those experiences. Perhaps that is more often the case than is thought. Centuries ago, the Voyages of Discovery to the 'New World' did not intend to bring the 'Old World' of

Europe into contact with the spirituality of indigenous peoples, but this is what ultimately happened and the view of one's own past is still changing. It concerns the wonderful quality of life that John Lennon has expressed in one of the songs as follows: 'Life is what happens to you, while you're busy making other plans.'<sup>8</sup>

The near-death experiences and the experiences in space tell us something about the life that happens to us while we are busy making other plans. These two different kinds of experiences also appear to have something in common in terms of content. Indeed, these experiences shifted and transgressed a natural boundary—that of our human life on Earth and that of life on Earth itself—and often provided those who went through them with a transformative experience that changed their lives forever. Something was revealed to them about the authentic nature of their own individual lives and about human life in general, and importantly, they became deeply aware of the illusory nature of the artificial boundaries created by man. The near-death experiences have shown that in the Western world we have artificially drawn the line between life and death way too tight, and that this is in fact a natural, open boundary that everyone has to cross at some point and marks a wonderful process of transformation. The space experiences have shown first of all that the artificial borders between the countries are meaningless from a cosmic perspective, and the same also turns out – as a consequence – to apply to the artificial borders between man and nature, between science and religion, and between different human identities. In short, although we have not undergone such a transformative experience ourselves, taking them seriously can help us to become aware of the negative impact of absolutizing the artificial boundaries. They can help us cross and shift those boundaries, getting closer to our authentic selves: they can make us more aware of where we are right now, in time and place, and who we are as human beings – two things that cannot be seen separately from each other – and how we can develop further individually and collectively from this position.

### **A lasting change in consciousness?**

When it comes to where we are, in time and place, and who we are as humans, the corona crisis has confronted us with the facts. The virus also represents one of the ways in which life happens to us while we were busy

making other plans, politically and economically. First it crossed the boundary from the animal to the human world. Then it spread across the globe, crossing other boundaries and borders, to which intensive interaction via air traffic has contributed greatly. It all reminded us that we are not only inextricably linked to our immediate living environment, but also as humanity to each other, and to the more-than-human world of which our human society is an integral part. The virus, as the representative of that more-than-human world, lets us know who is really in control on our planet. Connection with the local implies a connection on the planetary, and even beyond: when we feel embedded in the surrounding landscape, in the Motherland, then we also feel directly connected to Mother Earth, and the universe. Indirectly, the virus itself might have helped to let us have another good look at our own environment, which we assumed to know so well, and to see it in a new light. Perhaps it helped to bring us into contact with our own roots, to remind us what make us really human. In this respect, the meaning of word *human being* is telling. It shows that we are naturally rooted in the *humus*, the earth, and we are *humble* beings – just like the newborn baby that we all have been. And, as we may remember from a perhaps very distant past, this goes together with an attitude of openheartedness and receptivity.

Of course, we must be able to travel abroad to gain new experiences, and above all we must also enjoy being together on a terrace or during a concert. But let's hope that, just as it has been the case with most people who have had a near-death experience or with most astronauts who have had a space experience, the change in consciousness is a permanent one – an awakening experience that still has a chance to develop further. Let's hope – for fear of the unprecedented changes we face as a society – that we don't fall back on a collective scale to clinging even more tightly to our ego-identification with the Fatherland. Instead, let us realize even more deeply that we all, wherever we are in the world, always live in a Motherland first and foremost. And let us remain aware that we do not need to go anywhere to experience an embedded sense of freedom.

Leiden, July 2021

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <https://leidenlawblog.nl/articles/an-embedded-freedom-of-speech>

<sup>2</sup> To this sense of separation, and the process of healing it, I have paid extensive attention in a book on which I have been working in recent years, *The Whole Story. Healing Our Sense of Separation*. More information about it on my website: <https://eng.wimbonis.nl/book-the-whole-story/>

<sup>3</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous. Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*, Vintage Books, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Nabokov, *Where the Lightning Strikes. The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places*, Viking Penguin, New York 2006, p. 108.

<sup>5</sup> This insight by Hegel was referred to by the Irish philosopher and ‘modern mystic’ John Moriarty: Brendan O’Donoghue (ed.), *A Moriarty Reader. Preparing for Early Spring*, The Lilliput Press, 2013, p. 201.

<sup>6</sup> In de 70’er jaren heeft het onderzoek van Raymond Moody de bijna-dood ervaring op de kaart gezet. Andere interessante boeken zijn bijvoorbeeld: Pim van Lommel, *Eindeloos bewustzijn. Een wetenschappelijk visie op de bijna-dood ervaring*, Uitgeverij Ten Have, 2009; Anita Moorjani, *Dying to be me. My Journey from Cancer, to Near Death, to True Healing*, Hay House, 2014; Eben Alexander, *Proof of Heaven. A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*, Simon & Schuster, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Mitchell, *The Way of the Explorer: An Apollo Astronaut’s Journey Through the Material and Mystical Worlds*, G. Putnam & Sons, 1996; Russell L. Schweickart, ‘Space-Age and Planetary Awareness: A Personal Experience’, in: Stanislav Grof, and Marjorie Livingston Valier (ed.), *Human Survival and Conscious Evolution*, State University of New York Press, 1988, p. 239-250. In ons eigen land is er natuurlijk de astronaut André Kuipers die zich na zijn ruimte ervaringen ook bewust is geworden van het wonderbaarlijke en breekbare van het aardse leven. Hierdoor is hij, net als veel andere astronauten, veel tijd en energie gaan steken in het verspreiden van zijn ‘boodschap’: Froukje Jansen en Annick de Witt, *Duurzaamheid van binnenuit. Hoe een nieuw, bruisend bewustzijn de wereld verandert*, Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2015, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Een regel uit de song, ‘Beautiful Boy’, van het album ‘Double Fantasy’, 1980.