

# **Our changed relationship with the surrounding landscape**

*Lecture by Wim Bonis on March 18, 2023  
to celebrate the publication  
of his (Dutch) book 'Het helende verhaal'  
(= 'The healing story')*

## **The deeper spiritual crisis**

I'm going to tell you something about my book here. I wrote it while we were increasingly confronted with various crises around us. In recent years we have faced, among other things, a gender crisis, a racial crisis, an identity crisis and a refugee crisis. And we have seen how the climate crisis has become increasingly urgent on the agenda over the years. When I was already writing my book, we had the corona crisis on top of it in 2020. And when I finished the text of the book, Russia also started a war in Ukraine last year.

I think there is a much deeper spiritual crisis behind all these crises, and it is very important to pay attention to that. In short, this deeper spiritual crisis means that we once felt completely embedded in the surrounding natural world, but that over time we have increasingly lost sight of this. As a result, we have come to feel increasingly disconnected from the natural world, and therefore from the people around us.

## **The larger context**

The challenge is to individually and collectively bring that sense of being embedded in the natural world back to the fore – to become aware of *the larger context of the natural world* in which our individual lives and that of society take place. If we collectively become deeply aware of this again, this will also have a positive effect on understanding and structurally tackling all the other crises we are currently dealing with.

This sounds quite simple, but it is complex when it comes to the details. *The healing story* is above all *a very big story*, which I cannot fully tell here. Because we are in a beautiful rural area here, I will focus my story as much as possible on our changed relationship with the surrounding landscape.

## **A second skin, the larger body**

*What does it mean to feel embedded* in the surrounding natural world? It means we can't step out and observe it from outside. Nature does not just start

somewhere outside the city where the countryside or forests begin, and human presence is minimal. There is also nature in the middle of the city. It may seem obvious, but the natural world truly exists 360 degrees around us, wherever we are. And, of course, we are also a natural organism ourselves.

To underline the misunderstanding of the influence of the landscape on our lives, the American writer Valerie Andrews has stated that the landscape is our *second skin*. In other words, this means that with our small individual bodies we are always fully incorporated into the *larger body of the landscape*. The landscape obviously consists largely of space, but we must remember that according to the insights of quantum physics, our own body also largely consists of space!

A nice telling insight from another American researcher, Duane Elgin, ties in with this and actually goes a little further. He stated the following: *Who we are depends directly on where we are*. He therefore connects our sense of identity with the context of the natural world around us. His statement is central to my book. As far as I'm concerned, where we are doesn't just refer to where we currently are. It also refers in particular to how we ended up here historically and culturally over time. The spiritual crisis is in fact a crisis in which we no longer really know where we are, in time and place, and therefore no longer who we actually are,

### **A crisis of consciousness**

To fully understand what it means to feel embedded in the surrounding landscape, we must realize that the spiritual crisis we are currently in is also, to a significant extent, a *crisis of consciousness*. Current materialist science still views consciousness as a secondary phenomenon, nothing more than a product of our brains. But this view is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. Research and experience increasingly show that consciousness is the basis of life – and that matter is important, but secondary to consciousness. This means that our own body and the larger body of the surrounding landscape should not be reduced to its physical, material manifestations. The landscape in which we feel completely embedded has always been an animated landscape, and the body in which we feel at home has always been an animated body.

This feeling of being embedded has once been a daily experience of reality for all of us. We all experienced it individually when we were babies and small children, and then usually lost it more and more over the years, making way for a sense of separation. But feeling completely embedded in the surrounding landscape was once also an experience of reality for our distant ancestors, and collectively we have increasingly lost this feeling at some point. This has been a process that started about 6,000 years ago and has continued to

this day. And we must not forget that Western culture that emerged from it constantly affirms our individual sense of separation.

### **Who we are: our dual nature**

Although at some point we increasingly lost our sense of being embedded in the animated landscape, it has never completely left us: it has always remained part of our own human nature. As the Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal once argued, we all have *a dual nature* in this regard. On the one hand, according to him, we are born from the universe, and we remain inextricably linked to it. But on the other hand, we also experience ourselves as a subject placed in opposition to the world. By the term subject, van Baal means that as a subject we look from the outside at a world that consists of a collection of separate objects – a world that we position ourselves in opposition to, that we enter into a competition and struggle with.

In this regard, the word 'subject' can perhaps be a bit confusing. In psychology we talk about *the ego* in this context. We are all born with a balanced dual nature. And when it is in balance, our ego serves the deeper connected side of ourselves. Then our head is subservient to our heart. And as long as we manage to maintain that balance, our ego's urge for competition and struggle will naturally be tempered. Then we feel completely open to the outside world – and completely included in the balanced duality of the cyclical nature around us.

### **The dream about Jung**

The Jungian psychologist Marie-Louise van Franz once reported a dream that beautifully illustrates our balanced dual nature. It was a dream a woman had not long after Jung died. The woman had never met Jung. In the dream she was at a garden party where Jung was also present. She noticed that Jung was wearing strange clothes. He was wearing a jacket and pants that were bright green in the front and black in the back. She also saw that there was a black wall with a hole in it in the shape of Jung's outline. At one point Jung walked over to that hole and stepped in, so that the entire wall was black again and he could no longer be seen. But everyone knew he was still there. When the woman then looked at herself, she suddenly saw that she was also wearing clothes that were bright green in the front and black in the back.

What does that dream tell? The two colors of the clothes of course symbolically referred to the two sides of our dual nature. Not unimportant in that dream, I think, was that not only Jung as a man turned out to have that dual nature, but also the dreamer, a woman. We can also recognize that the cycles of nature are also reflected and manifested in us. And, of course, the black of the

black wall, into which Jung was absorbed when he stepped into the hole, represents a consciousness that never ends – an endless consciousness.

### **The Goddess as the first non-anthropomorphic Creator**

Let me delve a little deeper into the cultural and historical background of feeling embedded in an animated landscape. The animated landscape was of course also a Sacred Landscape for our distant ancestors. As far as I am concerned, this has everything to do with *the Goddess heritage, which has formed the basis of our experience of spirituality*. I paid extensive attention to this theme in my previous book. We must remember that this spirituality once began outside in the open air – the place where our distant ancestors spent most of their time. Therefore, their spiritual experience was essentially an *outdoor spirituality* – to be distinguished from the later forms of *indoor religion* that have emerged.

Researchers – including the American mythologist Joseph Campbell – have argued in this context that our mythological representation of the creation of life did not begin with the creation by a masculine God, but with the creation of life by a Goddess. It is actually very understandable that our distant ancestors once opted for a feminine representation. The women, of course, had experienced the creative power of the womb, and the men had witnessed it regularly. And we can assume that they had also often observed the creative process in animals and plants. It is therefore not surprising that they depicted their Divine Creator as feminine.

But it is also important to recognize that in principle they depicted this Goddess in non-human form, or *non-anthropomorphic*. The Goddess was a mysterious presence in nature who created all life continuously, from within, and then always remained strongly connected to Her entire Creation. People continued to experience Her presence throughout the surrounding Sacred Landscape – including in caves, in springs, in rivers, in hills and in mountains. This was a completely different way of creating than that of the later masculine God, who created life from outside, from a Heaven far above nature, and who therefore also remained far removed from His Creation.

The non-anthropomorphic nature of the Goddess can be recognized, for example, in the Tao of ancient China, in Gaia in ancient Greece, or in Danu in Celtic Ireland, and more recently in Pachamama of the indigenous peoples of the Andes. In the later anthropomorphic representation of the Triple Goddess we see the cycles of life still reflected in this regard – including the changes of the seasons and the process of life, death and rebirth. As is known, the masculine God only came into the picture later – first as the son and partner of the Goddess, as the Year God. And later, under patriarchal influence, he worked his way up to a position of dominance everywhere, to the top of a pantheon.

## **A reciprocal, conscious relationship with nature**

In terms of the Goddess heritage, it is also important to realize that for our distant ancestors there was always a *reciprocal relationship* with the surrounding animate nature – a nature that was also *very aware* of our presence within it. This perception of reality was still known in Europe in Neolithic times and later, for instance, in Celtic culture – and has even survived into our time in many indigenous cultures. In this context, the American Indian Chief Seattle famously said in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that we humans have not woven the web of life but are only a thread in this web. And that everything we do to the web, we also do to ourselves. More recently, the Kogi of Colombia have warned us of the damage we have done to the web of life. They argue that we have forgotten the Mother, and that we will only stop harming Her when we know again that She can feel.

For our distant ancestors, the surrounding Sacred Landscape included not only the earth, but also the heavens above. We see this clearly reflected, for example, in the megalithic constructions that were built in the Neolithic era, including the famous megalithic constructions of Stonehenge in England and Newgrange in Ireland. Research has made it increasingly clear that the site and position of all megalithic constructions from that period were always chosen very carefully, precisely adjusted to certain features of the surrounding landscape, as well as to the cycles of the sun or the moon. Particularly in England and Ireland, quite a lot of research has been done into this, not only into the archaeological remains of the past, but also into the reflection of the spiritual experience of reality of our distant ancestors in mythology and folklore.

## **Indigenous Goddesses in the Dutch river area**

Although it may be difficult for some Dutch people to imagine, we can assume that this type of spiritual experience of reality once also existed on Dutch soil among our distant ancestors. Compared to countries such as England and Ireland, little research has been done into this. Due to the fact that the Dutch landscape has always largely been a river delta area, it has of course often been subject to change. It has been constantly changed by floods, by changes to riverbeds and of course by centuries of structural intervention by humans in the landscape, including through reclamation and the building of dikes in the struggle against the water.

In any case, we know that until the arrival of the Romans, mainly native Goddesses were worshiped here in the river area of the Rhine, Meuse and Scheldt. As far as we know, they were not represented or depicted

anthropomorphically before Roman times. Many different names of these native Goddesses have come down to us through the inscriptions on Roman altar statues. Those names probably referred to the places where they were found. Presumably they expressed the deep connection of our ancestors with the local landscape.

### **Belonging to the land and private land ownership**

Feeling embedded in the surrounding landscape of our distant ancestors also meant that they did not place themselves, but the land, at the center of their experience of reality. They had a deep sense of *belonging to the land*. The concept of *private land ownership* was still unknown and unthinkable to them. Belonging to the land has been kept alive by indigenous cultures down to our time. When European settlers in 'the New World' came into contact with the Native Americans in North America, conflicts over land ownership regularly arose. The colonists thought in terms of potential land ownership, and the Native Americans understood the land only as an animated, Sacred Landscape – as land to which they belonged and to which their identity was inextricably connected.

When Swiss psychologist Carl Jung was visiting the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico in 1932, Chief Mountain Lake said to him about the Europeans that they were always looking for something – that they were restless. They didn't understand them and thought they were crazy. When Jung asked why they thought that, he replied that the Europeans all thought with their heads. When Jung then asked what they were thinking about, Chief Mountain Lake pointed to his heart. So, they thought from their hearts. In other words, the sense of belonging to the land is not separate from this thinking from the heart.

The European settlers who came to 'the New World' could only experience the material side of the land, as an entity to which they had positioned themselves outside – the land as an object to be traded. That view already had a long history and it is known that Western society has continued on the materialist path since then. But the vision of the Native Americans had a much longer history, and would also have been the vision of our distant ancestors. It took until our time before we really came to understand the meaning of the Native American insight.

### **The beginning of Western culture and the ego explosion**

As for the history of private land ownership, we must go back a few thousand years, to the period still associated with the emergence of Western culture. It is still widely accepted that the Sumerian culture, which flourished in the region of the Euphrates and Tigris some 6,000 years ago, marked the beginning of

‘Western civilization’. From here, this ‘civilization’ had managed to spread further and further west over the centuries. And it just so happens that the Irish Bishop Ussher in the 19th century, based on texts in the Bible, had calculated that God had also created the world around 4000 BC. But this period did not mark a beginning at all. As has now become increasingly clear based on newly acquired insights, a large-scale cultural change took place in this period compared to the culture that had preceded it.

About 6,000 years ago, a paradigm shift in human consciousness and culture occurred. In addition to profound changes such as the invention of writing, the people living in an area stretching from North Africa to the Middle East experienced a *collective ego explosion*. The English psychologist Steve Taylor has written an interesting book about this. Due to climate change, that area then suffered from prolonged drought, resulting in large-scale desertification. This had traumatic consequences for the people living there and generated an ego explosion in human consciousness, causing them to collectively identify with their ‘separate self’, their ego. Subsequently, identification with the ego, and the feeling of separation, would have spread throughout the Western world over the centuries.

### **‘His Story’ and the Patriarchal Shift**

Feminist researchers have rightly pointed out that the conventional view of Western history has been limited to telling ‘His Story’, the story of men. In their eyes, ‘Her Story’ had been completely ignored. As a result of the ego explosion, the male part of the population, and the so-called masculine principles with which they identified, had begun to dominate the culture. The conventional beginnings of Western culture were in fact a shift towards a patriarchal culture, which I have therefore called *the Patriarchal Shift*. The Austrian-American researcher Riane Eisler has called the culture that emerged at that time *a dominator culture*.

The shift brought about profound changes in several areas, including the rise of dualistic thinking. Because people had started to place themselves outside and above nature, the feeling of belonging to the land also faded into the background. The land was increasingly appropriated by people and could also be exploited in that capacity. Private land ownership formed the basis of the dominator culture of the first city-states, which later grew larger and could eventually grow into entire empires. And private land ownership still formed the basis of the nation states, which were formed from the 19th century onwards.

### **Fighting dragons, searching for the Lost Paradise**

Because humanity, and especially the male part of it, had increasingly placed itself outside and above nature from about 6,000 years ago, the power and culture of the Goddess heritage – which was so deeply connected to nature – had to be fought and oppressed. This struggle and oppression was depicted as a mythological battle against threatening dragon-like creatures. We see this taking shape for the first time in Sumeria and Babylonia. We see how the Babylonian God Marduk fought the Goddess Tiamat, killed her and recreated the world from her dead body. This struggle continued in later cultures that followed in these patriarchal footsteps. We then see, for instance, a battle in ancient Greece of Apollo against Python, of the Biblical God against Leviathan, and in Christianity of Saint George and Saint Michael against a dragon that remained nameless. Everything indicated, however, that the dragon could never really be killed, and that it continually resurfaced.

From the restlessness of the dominating ego, Western man (indeed, this involved mostly the male part of our species) was also urged to search for the Lost Paradise. From his ego consciousness he started looking in the material world, for a place that should physically exist somewhere on earth. The search for the Lost Paradise was a driving force behind the well-known ‘Voyages of Discovery’ to ‘the New World’. As is known, the culture of the indigenous peoples, which was found everywhere by the European colonists, was in principle recognized as paradisiacal. But this was soon dismissed as uncivilized and barbaric.

The result was that the patriarchal dominator culture from Europe was imposed all over the world – and that indigenous cultures were suppressed and largely destroyed. So ‘the New World’ thus became an extension of the ‘Old World’. As Chief Mountain Lake's vision in 1923 showed, the native inhabitants of this ‘New World’ already recognized the settlers’ unrest as thinking from the head. And they knew that not much good could be expected from that.

### **Dualistic struggle, openness of mind and the growth process**

In the fight against dragons and the search for the Lost Paradise we see the essence of dualistic thinking taking shape. It is a constant process of repulsion and attraction, which would later continue to repeat itself in many forms throughout the centuries in every fight against imagined enemies. This brings us to an important insight to which I paid a lot of attention in my book. Namely the principle of the dualistic struggle between two absolute opposites. This only emerged when we began to lose our sense of being embedded in the natural world and our sense of separation became central to our experience of reality.



We are all born with an open mind – and that *openness of mind* is necessary to continue to grow throughout our lives, not only biologically, but also psychologically and spiritually. Originally, our *energy* is focused on continuing this *growth process*. However, when we close our minds – when the ego side of our dual nature has come to dominate and determine our sense of identity – our inner growth process is also blocked (Bruce Lipton). This ensures that our energy moves to the stage of the dualistic struggle. In my book I discuss various areas in which this dualistic struggle has manifested itself over the centuries up to the present day, including: a struggle between men and women, between the masculine and the feminine, between competition and cooperation, between the human and the animal, between reality and fantasy, between civilization and barbarism.

Today we can see all around us that the energy put into these manifestations of dualistic struggle has now become a threat to the survival of our society on a planetary scale. That sounds a bit heavy, but in order to survive as humanity it has become an absolute necessity that we collectively rediscover the balance in our dual nature, in order to restore the balance in the world around us.

### **Restoring the balance: the Great Turning**

Fortunately, there is also *hope* to report in this regard. In addition to dualistic battlegrounds, we also see all around us that a process of healing and restoration of the balance is already in full swing – although unfortunately the mainstream media and science have only gradually picked up on this and given it a voice. The interesting thing about all this is that to restore balance, to generate the healing story, we do not immediately have to develop a new human capacity. In fact, we only need to remember something that is already part of our humanity – namely, the deeply connected side of our dual nature. During our individual development process, and the development of Western culture as a whole, it has been increasingly suppressed and lost from view, but it never really disappeared.

We are currently seeing a new cultural shift taking place throughout Western culture, a shift that we are currently still in the middle of. The patriarchal culture, which has determined Western culture for about 6,000 years, is gradually shifting towards what the American writer David Korten has referred to as *the Great Turning*. This is a shift from empires to an Earth Community. This shift is also referred to as a shift from a *control paradigm* to a *paradigm of interconnection* (Denise Breton), or a shift from a *dominator culture* to a *partnership culture* (Riane Eisler).

It is also a shift from the incomplete story of ‘His Story’, to the whole story, which is also *a healing story*. The American researcher Charles Eisenstein says in this context that we are currently *in between stories*. We see that there is an increasing revaluation of the heritage of indigenous cultures, and directly related to this, also of the heritage of the pre-patriarchal cultures of our ancestors. And we also see an increasing revaluation of women and the values that are considered ‘feminine’, including openness, vulnerability, empathy, compassion, connection and cooperation.

Individually, we see how the healing process expresses itself in the shift from the center of our sense of identity in the *head*, and in particular the left hemisphere, to the *heart* and *hara center* (Iain McGilchrist / Scilla Elworthy). The cultural shift that is now taking place individually marks a recovery of balance in our dual nature, which we experience as an expansion of our consciousness.

### **Expanding consciousness: the scientific field theories**

In science too, there has been an interesting broadening of consciousness in recent decades in the various *field theories* that have seen the light of day. In this regard, for example, David Bohm has developed his theory of the implicit and explicit order, Ervin Laszlo his theory of the Akashic Field, and Rupert Sheldrake his theory of morphic fields and morphic resonance.

They all show in different ways that an invisible dimension – located outside space and time, and imagined as an order or a field – exists at the basis of the tangible, material world. They also confirm that consciousness is the basis of life, and not matter. Sheldrake has argued in this context that the term ‘field’ is in fact nothing more than a scientific term for what was once referred to with the term ‘soul. With these field theories, the animated landscape and the animated body come back into the picture.

### **Expansion of consciousness: the near-death and space experiences**

In addition to field theories, in recent decades we have also increasingly become aware of near-death experiences – through many reports of these types of experiences and through extensive research conducted on them. In short, almost all of these show that when brain activity ceases, consciousness appears to become much more intense and clearer. Those who have had such an experience become aware that the life of our consciousness is separate from the life of our physical body. Most lose their fear of death completely. They have discovered that we all have an ‘endless consciousness’, as the Dutch researcher Pim van Lommel has called it. The near-death experiences confirm the insight that consciousness is the basis of life.

In my book I have placed the near-death experiences next to the space experiences that astronauts have reported on. The experience of seeing our planet from space has very often permanently expanded the astronauts' consciousness. Through the many images from space, such as the well-known photo of 'Earthrise', we have all become more aware of the fragility of our planet and of the fact that the Earth is included in the larger context of the cosmos.

Both the people who have had a near-death experience and the astronauts who have been in space, have been able to see life on Earth from the outside. This has made them look at life on Earth with different eyes. They have often publicly advocated dealing with each other differently – working together instead of competing against each other. They have suddenly started to feel part of the entire Earth Community, beyond the artificial borders between states. They have come to realize that the various crises that we have faced worldwide are based on a deeper spiritual crisis. By sharing their experiences with us, they also make an important contribution to the process of expanding consciousness.

### **Consciousness expansion: awe, walking, and awakening experiences**

What else do we see? We are rediscovering what it means to belong to the land, instead of just taking possession of it. And also how the natural world around us is not made up of dead objects that we can manipulate and exploit endlessly. We increasingly have overwhelming experiences that leave us speechless – nicely referred to (in English) as *awe experiences* –, experiences that allow us to temporarily merge with the larger context of surrounding nature. Then we observe the world around us again in openness and wonder. Recent studies have shown that these types of experiences also appear to make us less materialistic – and more empathetic and connected to other people (Dacher Keltner).

We also see that *walking* has also become increasingly popular. The corona crisis has given this an extra boost. By simply walking through a landscape, we can become increasingly aware – through the constantly changing *depth perspective* – that we are always fully embedded in the landscape (David Abram). In our time we have also increasingly been confronted with *awakening experiences*, in which we have spontaneously left our sense of separation behind us – temporarily or even permanently (Steve Taylor). All these experiences give us glimpses of 'the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible' – to use Charles Eisenstein's terminology.

### **The trees and the forest**

In the context of the book cover, which has been so beautifully designed by *Uitgeverij Oorsprong*, and our presence here in *Bosnodig*, I would like to say

something about the tree and the forest. Our connection with the surrounding landscape is beautifully depicted by a tree. The deeper and wider the roots can spread in the soil, the higher the tree will be able to grow. Recent research has shown how trees are connected underground and continuously communicate with each other and also support each other by exchanging substances. Not only the roots appear to contribute to this, but also a gigantic network of fungi (Suzanne Simard, Peter Wohlleben, Merlin Sheldrake). This collaboration not only concerns the same tree species, but also includes other tree and plant species. In short, a forest is more than a collection of individual trees. It is also a beautiful natural manifestation of the principle of Diversity and Inclusivity.

I often thought of the Irish philosopher John Moriarty in this context. He once left an academic career to retreat into the countryside of the west of Ireland and earn a living as a gardener. In connection with this transition, he said that he experienced life in an institution as a plant in a pot. The roots were touching the edge of the pot and this had blocked its further growth. He experienced his transition to life in the west of Ireland as a potted plant placed in the open ground, allowing its roots to deepen and spread freely, allowing it to continue to grow.

Another anecdote Moriarty related is nice to add. He worked for a while in Ireland as a gardener for the Dutch professor Westhoff who lived there. He sometimes took him for a walk in a neighboring forest. During one of those walks he noticed that he was writing down the names of plants they passed by. This led Moriarty to the realization that Professor Westhoff, despite his admirable intellectual development, had walked THROUGH the forest, but had never been IN the forest. The 19th century writer and researcher Henry David Thoreau, known for his stay in Walden, once said something similar. He said, 'What am I doing in the woods when I think of something outside the woods?' I think it would be a good idea that in a moment we go outside in this spirit.