

Longing for unity and connection

Wim Bonis

In the natural world around us, everything is constantly in cyclical motion – and in a balanced state, in which unity and connection are central. Because we are an inseparable part of the natural world, that sense of unity and connection is also deeply rooted in ourselves. But since we have started to see ourselves collectively and individually more and more as separate beings, our sense of unity and connecting has gradually been pushed further and further into the background. In the current crisis situation in which we find ourselves, a deep need and necessity has arisen to reawaken this sense in ourselves.

A spiritual crisis

It can hardly have escaped anyone's attention that we are currently facing various crises worldwide, including the crisis with regard to gender, the exercise of power, the perception of our identity, and, of course, with regard to climate change. The media regularly reports on people from all over the world, who from within those fields fight against various forms of abuse, oppression and injustice. The current political and social conflicts, as well as the wars that are raging in various places, cannot be seen separately from this. In my opinion, and a growing number of other researchers, these crises, conflicts and wars are different manifestations of something that individually and collectively reaches very deep into our humanity. In essence, we are dealing with a spiritual crisis here, which indicates, among other things, that we have largely lost the deeper sense of unity and connection due to our dominant sense of separation. It releases a deep longing in us to heal this sense of separation and thus restore the sense of unity and connection.

In between stories

We are at a point in our collective development where changes are constantly taking place in all areas of life. It is understandable that we look for some guidance in this – for example, for a religious, national or scientific foothold. The American writer and researcher Charles Eisenstein has argued in this respect that as a planetary society we are currently in an uncomfortable position of being *in between stories*. According to him, *the Story of Separation*, the old egocentric story of separation, which has become increasingly central to Western society for several millennia of development, has brought us into the current crisis situation. The new story in which interconnectedness is central, *the Story of Interbeing*, will replace the current old story, but it is currently still in the process of establishing itself among humans.

Eisenstein has indicated that this is not a completely new story, but that it is also an ancient story – with roots that reach further back than the period several thousand years ago when our Western society emerged and that have been able to survive in indigenous communities all around the world. Our distant ancestors appear to have been familiar with phenomena such as unity and connection and living indigenous communities are often still familiar with them. In the current period of ‘in between stories’, we are individually and collectively confronted with the question of who we actually are as human beings and to what we feel connected.

Born in unity, connectedness and balance

Fortunately, we modern humans have never completely lost our sense of unity and connection. It represents the deepest side of our *dual nature*, with which we were all once born. In this respect, the Dutch anthropologist Jan van Baal once pointed out that – on the one hand – we are born from the universe and remain inextricably linked to it, but that – on the other hand – we also position ourselves as subjects against the world. In this respect, depth psychologists talk about the (collective) unconscious and consciousness, about the Self and the ego, about feeling and reason. It is good to keep in mind that we are all born into a state of *balanced duality*, in

which our ego/subject side – which has yet to develop – is subservient to our deeper connected side.

All nature around us is also characterized by this dual nature. It moves continuously through various cycles, including those of night and day, of winter and summer, of death and life. Just as in ourselves, there is always a balanced duality behind the unity in nature. This principle was already nicely symbolized by the Chinese Taoists a few millennia ago by the – now well-known – yin-yang symbol. It shows how within the embracing circle of the Tao the two elements of dark and light, of the feminine and the masculine, or of receptivity and assertiveness, complement each other. They are constantly subject to cyclical change, but remain in balance with each other.

We also continue to go through these cyclical processes throughout our lives – including, of course, the cycle of sleep (usually at night) and our waking state (usually during the day). Our own state of balanced duality continues to exist as long as we continue to experience our animate body as part of the larger animate landscape body, the local manifestation of Mother Earth.

The lost balance

The current crisis situation clearly shows that we have lost the balance in this respect. Gradually, the ego side of our consciousness came to the fore and began to dominate our lives. To the extent that we have connected our identity to our ego, a sense of separation has become central to our lives.

There is a collective and individual side to this development. In addition to Eisenstein, there are also other researchers who have shown that over the past several thousand years, we have collectively come to experience ourselves more and more as separate beings. The English psychologist Steve Taylor has argued that around 4000 BC an *ego explosion* took place in human consciousness – a process that probably started as a result of a desertification of a vast area called *Saharasia*, which stretches from North Africa to beyond the Middle East. According to him, the result of this was

that collectively a sense of separation became central to the consciousness of the people of that time, and through the centuries gradually spread across Europe. From the period of the ‘voyages of discovery’, it was spread further to the other continents. The spreading of this sense of separation has always taken place in a *top-down* way, and was imposed on people from without.

According to a number of feminist researchers, including Riane Eisler, these developments largely coincide with the increasing dominance of men and of the qualities considered ‘masculine’ – including competition and struggle – which have given Western society its patriarchal character. In Eisler's view, thousands of years ago we gradually changed from an egalitarian partnership culture to a hierarchical dominator culture.

In our individual lives we have all gone through such an ego explosion, when in our childhood the ego started to develop quite suddenly. Because in our society as a whole the story of separation has become increasingly central over the past millennia, we were (and still are) tacitly stimulated by our cultural environment to connect our identity with our ego, and to let this egocentric identity determine who we are as human beings. In doing so, we have anchored the distinction and division between different human identities in our culture.

In itself, of course, we often perceive other people, animals, plants and objects as separate entities. Especially during the day this is usually the case. Then the other deeper side of ourselves, which feels inextricably linked to the whole of life – not only to our fellow human beings, but also to the surrounding natural world and all living beings that are part of it – might remain largely out of sight from our conscious experience. But that doesn't mean that side has disappeared.

Substitutes for a real sense of unity

The dominating sense of separation has created an indefinable, restless feeling in us that we are missing something essential, a feeling that our life is incomplete. Of course, we all want to take away this restless feeling, make our lives complete again. But not everyone has the time and energy to

understand how deeply the sense of separation is actually embedded in our individual lives and culture. There are substitutes available that can temporarily give us a – superficial and limited – sense of unity and connection. The supply of these types of substitutes is widespread in our society.

In sports, such as in soccer, it is nicely illustrated how behind such a limited sense of unity the sense of separation always continues to play a role. When we strongly identify with a particular club, we are very happy when our club's team has won a match. The mutual feeling of unity is strengthened by it. We do see, however, that the other club, the opponent, consists of the same kind of people. By having the players from both clubs wear different outfits, we can easily tell the teams apart. The fact that the distinction between the two clubs is very superficial becomes even clearer when players from different clubs are included in the same national team and suddenly wear the same outfit. In the Netherlands, we are very happy then when the Dutch team wins. The sense of unity that we experience is connected to our separate Dutch identity.

If we could fly above the stadium like a bird at the end of a match, we would clearly see below us how limited the evoked sense of unity actually is. Some of the supporters are exuberant and celebrate, while another part leaves the stadium gloomily and defeated. With a real sense of unity, everyone in the stadium should feel the joy of being together.

At the closing ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, emphasis was placed on the importance of unity and connection on a global scale. The organizers wanted to show that this event brings people together from all countries of the world. However, this still did not take away from the fact that for weeks the principle of competition and struggle, of winning and losing, had been central. But it is of course true that in the end sport remains just a game. Often we have quickly forgotten about our club or country winning or losing a game.

Dualistic struggle

It becomes very different when strong identifications with separate groups arise in society – for example in the religious, political, or national field – with an accompanying vision of life that offers a foothold to the group members. These are still substitutes where the feeling of unity and connection is limited to one's own group and is fed by a sense of separation. The firmer the grip on it, the more this feeling of separation comes to the fore and can cause polarization.

All over the world, we can see manifestations of this in society and politics: 'right' is opposed to 'left', Republicans are opposed to Democrats, scientists are opposed to believers, climate deniers are opposed to climate activists, etc. It seems that the parties involved – one party probably more than the other – with their dualistic battlegrounds are still stuck in the old story. This while, as mentioned earlier, as a society we have now arrived 'in between stories' and another, new story is on the horizon. We can see all around us how much – unnecessary – suffering and damage is caused by these battlegrounds.

Expansion of consciousness

In an idealistic mood, we would like to wake up the polarized, struggling people individually and collectively – to make them aware of the things they so clearly miss in their lives, of all the beauty around them that they don't seem to see. But all change always starts with ourselves. In short, be the change you want to see in the world – as Gandhi supposedly once has said.

In this respect, we have entered a time in which we have to descend deeper within ourselves and at the same time open our minds further to the outer world. To truly re-awaken to the deeper connected side of ourselves, we need to *enlarge the context* from which we view life. In essence, we are all earthlings. Our biological, psychological and spiritual growth process, from birth to death, and perhaps beyond, takes place within the matrix – the womb – of Mother Earth. Therefore, we must at least enlarge the context to the planetary level.

It is obvious that we cannot expand our consciousness from our egocentric consciousness and rational thinking, because these have been responsible for narrowing the context considerably. We only make an expansion of consciousness possible, when we dive into the depths of our mind. To do this, we must (re)open our minds to the deeper powers of *imagination* and *intuition*, to *feeling* from our hearts, to *experiencing* the world through our whole being, as an inseparable part of the surrounding natural world. In this way, we bring the lost balance in ourselves back to life and can really heal our sense of separation.

In this regard, Steve Taylor has argued that today more and more people are having *awakening experiences*, going through a process of *spiritual awakening*. These kinds of experiences and processes can awaken a real sense of unity and connection in us. All kinds of different activities can make an important contribution to this, such as meditation, taking long walks (in nature), developing and practicing your empathy, delving into an interesting theme, exploring your dreams. Everyone has to see for him- or herself what appeals the most. As Taylor pointed out in his book *Extraordinary Awakenings*, even trauma can generate an awakening process.

Connected to the natural world

It is known that for many astronauts, who have seen our ‘blue planet’ from outer space, have usually undergone a complete transformation in their consciousness by that outer space experience. They saw with their own eyes that our earth is a spherical matrix in which night and day cyclically alternate constantly and human life is fully included in it. Importantly, the astronauts initially focused on outer space, but their attention was drawn back to where they came from. By leaving the earth, a deep connection with Mother Earth was awakened in them. During their outer space journey, they became aware of the unity and interconnectedness of all earthly life – a life in which the artificial boundaries that we humans have drawn between all kinds of areas no longer matter at all.

We can imagine this sense of interconnectedness, when we see the photos of our planet from outer space. As far as I am concerned, this sense is beautifully expressed by the term ‘belonging’. It is *a sense of belonging* – to the surrounding landscape, and by extension, to the earth. In this way, we can truly feel part of the Earth Community – a global community that is not limited to the human world, but also includes animals, plants, rivers, mountains, etc.

When we have expanded our consciousness to the planetary level, the meaning of the Taoist yin-yang symbol can really dawn on us: the circular unity of the Tao is, of course, only a flat representation of a three-dimensional sphere – like the matrix of Mother Earth that always envelops us. Apparently, a few thousand years ago, the Taoists did not have to travel into outer space to be aware of this. And as the current awakening experiences of humans often show, we do not have to make an expensive trip into outer space to reawaken the sense of unity and interconnectedness in ourselves. It is within the reach of all of us, and also shows us the way out of the current global crisis situation.

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