

The turning point in our culture

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US presidential election

Just before the US presidential election in 2024, the American writer and environmentalist Vanessa Chakour wrote the following on her substack environment on November 4: ‘Plants and more-than-human-animals constitute the majority of life on Earth but they have no say in the political systems that define the world around them. We humans make up just .01 percent of the planet’s biomass and have altered the world for all other species. (...) The trees, plants, and all the other animals deserve a voice in the future of our shared planet. I hope you vote on their behalf.’

I don't know if her voting advice has had any effect. In any case, it is clear that the winner of these elections will have little affection for trees, plants and other animals. Donald Trump immediately announced ‘radical changes’ with great bravado and was convinced that he would lead ‘the biggest political movement ever.’ He did not seem to realize that his politics actually fit in quite seamlessly with the way in which male rulers have determined the course of our Western culture for about six thousand years. In essence, this culture has always been patriarchal – and in addition, also nationalistic, imperialist and dualistic.

It is certain that a turning point in our culture is going to take place, but it will be of a very different kind than populist politicians like Trump have in mind. It will herald the end of the current patriarchal design of our culture, in which the male rulers have always assumed that dominance, oppression of women and of ‘feminine’ qualities are necessary to make cultural flourishing possible. In their policies, the sowing of dualistic divisions among the people has always been an important one. Today's populist politicians are not going to bring any change in this.

Consciousness experience

As I explained in my Dutch book *Het helende verhaal* ('The healing story'), this patriarchal culture has brought us into an all-encompassing spiritual crisis, which has manifested itself in various ways. In my opinion, the core of it lies in our experience of consciousness. In the still prevailing materialistic view of science – which is also widely supported in society – consciousness is considered a product of matter, of our brain cells.

In the meantime, however, there are more and more indications that not matter but consciousness forms the foundation of life; that our consciousness is not so much centered in our head, but in our heart. In addition, it is also becoming increasingly clear that our consciousness is not limited to this one life, and that the whole of surrounding nature is conscious – also of our presence in it. If we collectively allow these new insights to broaden our experience of consciousness, this will bring a turning point in our entire culture. Then 'the more beautiful world that our hearts know is possible', as described by American writer Charles Eisenstein, will come into view.

The nation and the land

Insight into the situation that has arisen in the US can also help us with this (in the Netherlands and elsewhere), because it is a reflection of the reality in which we all find ourselves. It is important in this regard, that Chakour's viewpoint outlined above shows that she feels connected not so much to the US – to a nation in which fifty states work together – but much more to the *Earth Community*. This term was first used by the American cultural historian and 'ecoth theologian' Thomas Berry. With it, he wanted to emphasize that on a planetary level we are all inextricably part of a community that includes all other living beings in addition to ourselves. He was inspired by the culture and spirituality of the indigenous inhabitants of America, the Native Americans.

Following on from this idea, another American writer, Valerie Andrews, has emphasized that America was a *nation* before it was a *land*. This is a

telling insight. Most European settlers, from the moment they arrived in ‘the New World’, mainly focused on creating a new nation. For them, America became in the first place a new *Fatherland*: an abstract nation that, among other things, legitimized private land ownership, and was symbolized by a flag – and (since the 19th century) also by an anthem. For many Americans, this is still the case, as the latest election results have shown.

For the indigenous peoples, the roles with regard to land ownership had always been reversed, and it was unthinkable that we humans could own pieces of land individually. They had always felt themselves fully embedded in the surrounding land(scape) – in a living and animated land, with which they maintained a reciprocal relationship. It was for them a *Motherland*: a living being who took care of them and whom they also cared for, a local manifestation of the Earth community. In this respect, the European settlers, their descendants and the later immigrants, often walked through the land without seeing it, without really having been present in it.

A cyclical and linear worldview

The difference between a land and a nation is also reflected in the difference between a cyclical and linear worldview. The surrounding land is constantly going through cyclical changes. Because our distant ancestors still felt completely included in them – and therefore considered the land Sacred –, they had marked the turning points in the annual cycles with celebrations: in Celtic culture, for example, each year was marked by eight annual festivals. The recurring pattern of the celebrations underlined the fact that the cyclical processes of change in nature are reflected in the cycles of our human lives. Indigenous peoples around the world have continued to pay attention to those cyclical turning points to this day.

In our current modern culture, the nation has come to the fore along with a linear worldview. And with it, the focus on the cyclical turning points has shifted to the background. Except celebrations like Christmas and New Year's Eve, most people have come to mark and celebrate the important turning points in their personal lives – the moments like the ones that are related to birth, study, marriage and work. The focus has thus shifted from

the processes of change in the surrounding natural world to the developments in our human lives.

In our individual lives, linear thinking has found expression in our strong need for, and identification with, developments that must constantly move forward and up. From an egocentric self-image, we think it is important to climb further and further up the social ladder, to earn a little more, to live a little more spaciouly, to be able to travel more often to more and more distant places, etc. We are proud then to show our achievements in this area to the outside world. From this mentality, we generally avoid the inevitable turning point – to a descent and decline – as much as possible.

The impact of linear *power over* thinking

Collectively, linear thinking has manifested itself in social developments that must also constantly move forward and up. It cannot have escaped anyone's attention that this thinking has taken shape in the ever-growing market economy. The emergence of this linear thinking – which cannot be separated from *hierarchy* and the exercise of *power over* – has been a gradual process of thousands of years, which more or less coincides with the emergence of our patriarchal culture. It was given shape and content by the nationalist/imperialist aspiration of male rulers to establish 'empires', and to expand their power and sphere of influence further and further across the earth. From the first city-states in Sumer onwards, the history books have recorded the results of this aspiration in various heroic 'success stories' – such as those about the Greek Empire of Alexander the Great, the Roman Empire and the colonizing European countries. The Nazi dream of 'the Third Reich' was also in line with this aspiration, and has clearly shown its destructive side.

Today's populist politicians all promise to take a completely new course, but turn out to be just following in the footsteps of the previous nationalist/imperialist rulers. They want to extend the track of linear power thinking a little further into the future. In doing so, they do their best to avoid the global spiritual crisis that is looming over us – of which the climate crisis is an important part – and to keep the turning point in our

culture at bay as much as possible. To keep their vision alive, they dualistically project all the discontent that has arisen in society onto various imaginary enemies – including ‘the left-wing elite’ and the asylum seekers – who are accused of being the cause of all misery.

Thinking from the heart

As long as this dualistic projection on imaginary enemies continues to determine their (and our) thinking, Eisenstein's ‘more beautiful world’ will of course not come any closer. But the turning point to that more beautiful, post-patriarchal world is really going to come. Two things, I think, will be central to creating that more beautiful world. First, we will have to free ourselves – individually and collectively – from the prison of our heads, in which our identity has become completely stuck in a narrowed, undeveloped ego consciousness. And second, we will have to restore our lost contact with the land around us, and be reminded that this land – like ourselves – is a living and animated entity. These two points are closely related.

The first point is well portrayed by an experience of the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. In 1932, during his visit to the US, he met with Chief Mountain Lake of the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico. This Chief told Jung that they had observed that the ‘whites’ were uneasy and restless; that they were always looking for something, but didn't know what they wanted. His tribesmen did not understand the whites and thought they were all crazy. When Jung asked him why they thought that, he answered: ‘They say they think with their heads.’ When Jung then asked what he thinks with, he answered: ‘We think here’, pointing to his heart.

This is a good illustration of the fundamental difference between the mindset of the native inhabitants of America and that of the European settlers – a difference that apparently still existed after hundreds of years of mutual contact. Through thinking with their heads, the European colonists had once shaped America as an abstract nation, as a Fatherland. They could only perceive the land in a material sense, as pieces of land that they could take possession of and exploit without limits. They did not realize that they

were also trapped in an undeveloped ego consciousness that made them restless. The Taos Pueblo, however, who still felt connected to the living Motherland by thinking with their hearts, did see this.

Being present in nature

For the second point, Valerie Andrews' aforementioned viewpoint – that America was a nation before it was a land – is significant. It suggests that we would do well to experience the living reality of the Motherland behind the abstract façade of the Fatherland again. Although the Motherland is always and everywhere around us, even in the middle of a city, regularly visiting nature reserves can help to make us more aware of that reality. Because the Netherlands does not have unspoiled, mountainous regions, here we could, for example, regularly go for a walk in a forest – to let the sense of being embedded in the Motherland penetrate us more deeply.

The Irish philosopher and 'modern mystic' John Moriarty has indicated that you have to have an open, receptive mind to really be present in a forest. He took regular walks with a Dutch botanist, Victor Westhoff, who lived in Ireland and for whom he worked as a gardener. On one of these walks in the forest with him, he saw that during this walk his companion filled his notebook with names of specific plants they encountered. Later, Moriarty realized that his companion – despite the fact that he considered himself a Buddhist for ecological and spiritual reasons – had been walking *through* the forest, but at no time had been *in* the forest. In this context, Henry David Thoreau had already said something similar in the 19th century: 'What am I doing in the woods when I think of something outside the woods?'

Moriarty and Thoreau had, in fact, stumbled upon the widespread 'degenerate mentality' in the Western world, which has a long history and prevented many from feeling truly present and grounded in the natural world. This mentality, powered by thinking with the head, lives on to this day – even outside the woods. We can walk through an open landscape without really having been *in* it. Or we can swim in a lake, in a river, or in the sea without actually having been *in* it.

Awakened consciousness

But fortunately, change is in the air in this field. In our time, more and more people are having *awakening experiences*, as extensively described by the English psychologist Steve Taylor. From the expanded consciousness generated by these experiences, we can not only better ground ourselves in the surrounding natural world and reconnect with the Motherland. It also makes us think more with our hearts.

Interestingly, Carl Jung said the following about his experience in the surrounding natural world: ‘At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons.’ So, from his awakened consciousness Jung could sometimes experience natural phenomena from within. Everyone has the potential to awaken in this way. If we humans make up only .01 percent of the planet’s biomass, as Vanessa Chakour has indicated, then from an awakened consciousness we will get access to the remaining 99.99 percent.

The turning point

The more people start having awakening experiences, the more likely it will be that a turning point in our culture will take place and we can finally start creating a more beautiful, post-patriarchal world from our hearts. If that happens, we will not only feel motivated to vote in an election on behalf of the trees, the plants and the other animals. We will then also hear all the various voices from the entire Earth community more and more clearly and respond to them. Including those of our – sometimes dissenting – fellow human beings.

As I indicated above, the cultural turning point is really going to come. But before that happens, our patience will be tested by the populists.

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