



Reflections on nature: Dasein in Umwelt

Exploring the way in which our existence is embodied and alive in the world

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In the field of existential-phenomenological philosophies there is a consensus that humans live in an embodied-relational world and that their knowledge of self and world is mediated through the givens of their body-mind existence.

It is this body-mind existence that I find fascinating, where I like to explore how my lived experience of being gives me an embodied sense of connection and of being alive that contributes to me owning and appreciating my existence beyond a cognitive or theoretical framework. In recent years the natural world has been calling me and it is this relationship that I examine, here in the light of philosophical notions of perceiving and sensing self and the world.

The Swiss existential psychologist Ludwig Binswanger termed the connection between animals and humans to the world *Umwelt*, translated as ‘the world around’, poetically expressed perhaps as ‘the world that encircles existence’. German philosopher Martin Heidegger was also interested in this relationship and offered the concept of *Dasein*, translated as ‘being here’, or presence.

Both thinkers were trying to understand what the connection between self and world entails, wanting to capture the atmosphere of being alive as a human amongst animals, plants, and things. Linking these two concepts, I arrive at a starting point that goes something like “I am here in the world that surrounds me”, leading then to the questions “How am I present to my environment? And what effect is this having?”

This brings me to being a child. Children are born phenomenologists, gifted with a finely tuned embodied perception that precedes cognitive development and, as they grow, they learn about self and world through play and exploration. It is the re-connecting to childhood experiences that helps clarify *Umwelt* and *Dasein* and supports a deepening within the natural world so as to find a firmer existence as an adult, expansive in its aliveness. This seems to contribute to a sense of well-being and balance, the emergence of which is in the wellspring of beginnings, stretching into the adult that I am now.

Childhood

Recently, my father said to me, “Fifty years ago your mother brought you into this world and by doing so she gave you light.”

At first, my parents wanted to name me Chiara, meaning ‘bright’ or ‘light’ in Italian, which would have been a fitting name. Light accompanied and intrigued me throughout my life; I was seeking it out, I was feeling it inside of me, often, and I also noticed the dark.

Light and dark court each other in a dance, the *chiaroscuro*, a term used in art to capture the dark sky against the bright mirror reflection of the water, the trees at dusk standing sharply against the fire in the sky, the long cool shadows that buildings throw against the blinding light of the hot midday sun. There is a stillness to that contrast, a tipping point, hovering, until you decide to step out into the light or into the dark.

Stepping out was something that I was wanting to do as soon as I was able to walk. Leaving the indoors is a transition into another world, of a different density, a world of possibilities, *Dasein*.

It is in the outside, in nature, where we meet Earth and Sky, and the possibility to journey in real terms or in our imagination over the hills and mountains, through streams and along rivers, across continents, until we meet the waves of the big ocean. Out there,

nature, is the World, *Umwelt*, ready to make a mark on me. There is hope too, for when the sun rises, it is a new day, and life starts afresh.

In winter, in Switzerland, when the snow descended upon us, lots of it, I felt delight, but I also watched the branches of the pine

trees droop more and more under the weight of the snow and felt concern. I used to go over to them, grab the lower branches and snap the snow off, so that the trees may not have to carry so much weight.

Imprinted in my being is that moment of liberation, when, with one snap, millions of particles exploded in the air in the form of a big snow cloud, showering my face with gentle yet cold little pricks. Time was momentarily suspended. And as the sun penetrated the cloud of snow, she created a glittering and sparkling spectacle. For milliseconds I felt suspended in a deep kind of holding and happiness, where all was well.

When I was eight, I found a baby sparrow on the school playground. It was naked, almost dead, cold without its plume of feathers. I took it home, made it a nest in an old shoe box, fed and nurtured it until it became a feathery-round, and chirpy ball.

Soon we had a game, throwing the little one from

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the balcony into the sky, off it flew with delight looping a small round, coming back to our extended fingers, repeatedly. One day, the little one met its demise. Domesticated, it preferred to cruise the ground rather than fly and so my poor father stepped on it by accident.

Deeply saddened to be the cause of the bird's death, my father struggled telling us. We comforted him and proceeded to create a final resting place for our friend. Prayers said and done, we proceeded with life as intended.

Life and death

Death and life are part of a natural process of emergence and destruction. It is through personal loss that we are confronted with this cyclical truth.

In the darkness of the glaring hospital cubicle, knowing and not knowing that life inside me had ceased to be, a nurse comes in, busying herself, addressing me almost in passing, softly, "Madame, not all life makes it, nature has her way to bring things to an end. It's normal madame, don't worry." And as quickly as she arrived, she had gone. Preparing me, helping me, to settle into the waves of loss.

Feeling the spirit of my lost foetus hover above me and elevate my spirit in turn, I was propelled closer to nature's way, touching the edges of shedding the layers of fear. Stepping into its orbit of existence I experienced something bigger than the here and now:

For three hours, in a curtained strip-lit cubicle, images and sounds arise. Of people dressed in black, congregating around the dead. Of candles lit and the singsong of prayers. My thoughts, strangely, with my parents, and their sorrows. "This is the sacrificial lamb" kept running through my head and with every tear the family cloud dissolved, giving way to an unfamiliar warmth spreading across my body.

When my dear friend, my pregnant-at-the-same-time buddy, phoned me a few months later to say that her infant boy had been born still, on a deeper level, I was that little bit more receptive to the passing of souls. With the rawness of her voice echoing, I slid to the floor with a gasp, the twins quickly by my side asking with straightforward concern "Mama, what is the matter?" helping me to respond simply "He died, her boy has died. It is okay, it is okay, it's life".

It is through meeting death as a normal part of life that opens the possibility of the embrace. Mother nature has her ways.

Wild immersions

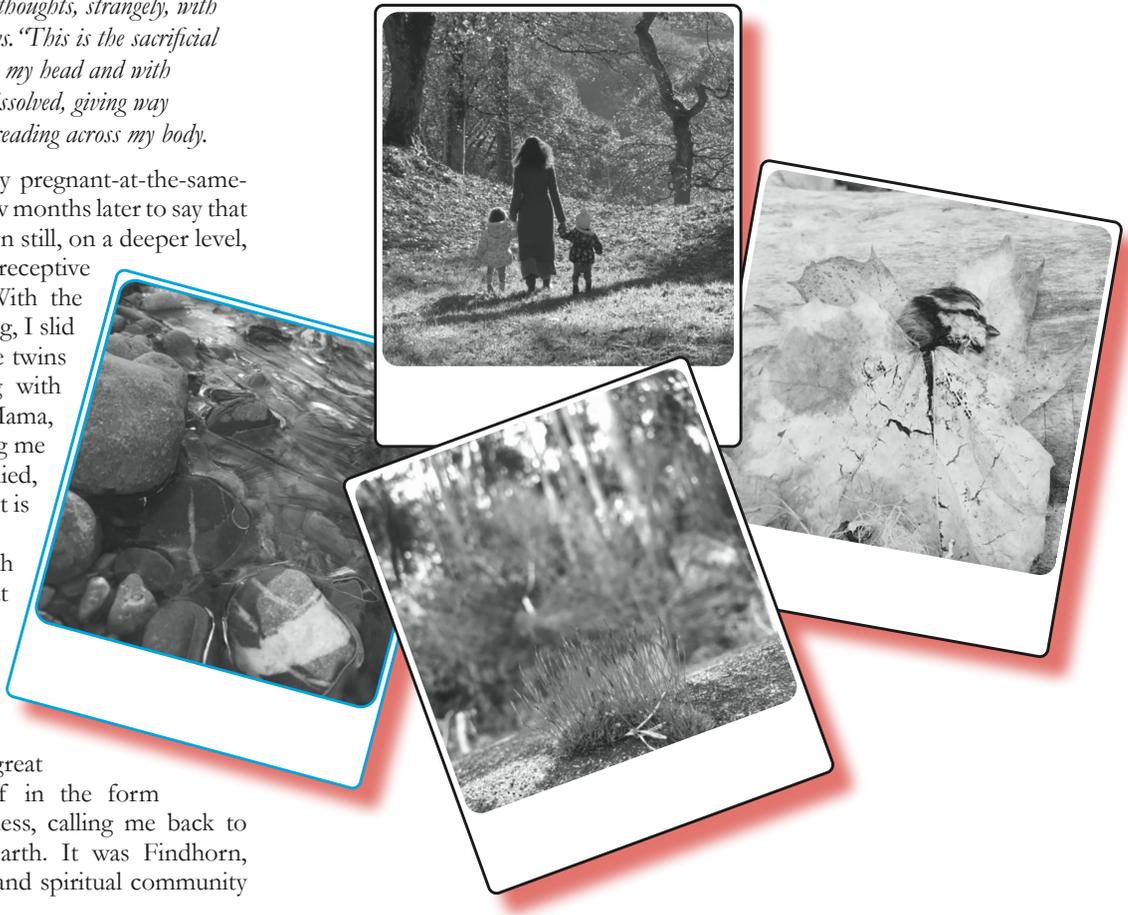
A few years later, she, the great mother, announced herself in the form of perimenopausal wilderness, calling me back to a womanhood closer to earth. It was Findhorn, Scotland, in the ecovillage and spiritual community

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of gigantic cabbages, that provided the context to embracing my being-in-the-world more consciously. Asking me to suspend my judgments and scepticism about the possibilities of connection and the nature of reality.

In the harsh calling of the geese, every morning, I began to look and listen in a different way. In that attention, all beings became alive, the inanimate and, above all, the dead. I am the tree. I am the rock. I am the soil. I am the air. I am water, and fire is the element through which we pass into another dimension. Revelations falling like domino pieces. The curious seal locked eyes with me and my son. A moment so gentle, so at ease, so together, for a long time, pushing us into a different dimension. As I implored my dead mother to show her love, a fat frog crossed my path carrying her little one on her back. The blue tit, found on the roadside, a gift sent, so vulnerable in its death, yet so alive. Held in my hand death and life collapsed into timelessness, and my heart broke open. The pine trees growing out of dunes, seemed to reach out to me, and speak, on a soft carpet so embracing, that words fail. With such perfect beautiful surroundings, the communion perhaps made easy, perfection despite the cold wind, the spirit of the waves rushing and lapping at my thoughts, the tiny tentacles of the moss on the wall singing, sand shift-shaping, presences of bigger proportions.

This opening was sealed by meeting my ten-year-old self. It was she who ultimately brought me back home, into the fold of Mother Nature. As I began





← to trust that it was okay to sit and be, I slowed and settled down. Suddenly, there she stood, patiently. Her feet firmly planted on the ground, she appeared strong, yet her gaze was gentle and vulnerable. Blue eyed and golden haired.

She stood on the soft mounds of sand covered in sumptuous, rich moss showered with pine, the wind curling through and between the trees, all without exception standing tall and proud, swaying, spreading their exquisite smell. I lay there, inhaling deeply, enveloped by the outer and having found the inner, my child, who all along knew about this, understood unquestionably the aliveness of all things. *Dasein in Umwelt*.



My authentic embodied self

Mother Earth's teaching stretches back, faithfully, eternally, millions of years and at the same time reaches forward into the present, and into our potential future. Mother Earth is firmly rooted in the now, always, this much is certain.

Her surrounding us, the world, starts at my front door, in my community in my local area, her wings spreading across the country, the isles, across the continent, connected via the waters, forming one whole body, Planet Earth. She taught me that she is there whenever I am there. *Dasein*. From her I have learned that the answer lies within me once I remember to ask.

As I stand by the pine, in my local inner-city park, off the beaten track of families and dogs and bikes, something stirs inside of me. I am overcome with grief, the tears stream down my face, I have no control, taken by surprise. The pine has unlocked the grief that I was holding onto hard.

The flow of tears feels good, as if finding a long-forgotten friend. The tree stands with me, beside me, unwavering, until the waves subside. And then, a calm energy rises within me. Recognition. Acceptance. A certain solidity. A knowing what next. I thank her. I go back to her often, at dusk, with fiery sunsets, surrounded by wet slippery mud.

Poetry and art arising from nature as home

The American poet Mary Oliver illustrates this strong sense of connection and belonging in her writing, strongly rooted in her *Dasein* and *Umwelt*. This comes particularly alive in the glimpses she offers into the world of the fox.

Skitting across the ice, chasing her dog, in playful delight I am there with her, the observer, and with them the players. When I enter her world, I experience what she feels and at the same time I am the fox, the trees, the clouds, the sky. It feels true, deeply, of where I am from, the human place of all humans, home.

Mary Oliver was serious about her immersion into nature. Perhaps more than serious, it was for her a means of survival and expression, a necessity to heal and understand through being. A truth of some sort, that needs expressing:

Deep in the woods, I tried walking on all fours. I did it for an hour or so, through thickets, across a field, down to a cranberry bog. I don't think anyone saw me! At the end, I was exhausted and sore, but I had seen the world from the level of the grasses, the first bursting growth of trees, declivities, lumps, slopes, rivulets, gashes, open spaces. I was some slow old fox, wondering, breathing, hitching along, lying down finally at the edge of the bog, under the swirling rick-rack of the trees.

Wild Geese: Selected Poems, 2004: 15

Renewed readings of her most famous poems 'Wild Geese' and 'The Journey' feel like invitations to find my way home, to be myself, truly, uncompromisingly "over and over announcing your place in the family of things" and "the stars began to burn through the sheets of clouds, and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world..."

There is a meaningful connection between nature and self, which is multifaceted, from the inside to the outside, to the togetherness of an us, necessarily leading from the micro to the macro. *Dasein in Umwelt*.

Joan Jonas, the American artist, explores time, space and female subjectivity embedded in nature and landscape says, "All early stages of life took place in water, the origin of life, the birth of animals, the evolution of nervous systems, the appearances of complex bodies" (Art in Action, 2020). It is through that connection, that memory, that we become invested in our existence, the environment, both our

personal lives, and that of people around the globe. Water, as an element, connects all continents, and connects our bodies to the earth. Jonas again says "We all come from the sea, and we have memories of it. In our minds, in our bodies...it is the beginning and the end of the creation of the world" (Art in Action, Art Basel, YouTube, 2020).

Dasein in Umwelt

Thus, from childhood memories to adult immersions, from the earthy woods to bodies of water, life is and arises out of what has gone before and what passes on, the natural cycle of life on earth.

Celebrating life, being present to and embracing death, is what binds us humans together. As creatures of nature our primary relationship is that with our Universal Mother Gaia. She is here, enduring, and strong with her deep roots and long arms encircling all life on earth.

With deepest gratitude to the forces of life, nature is almost all I need for me to understand my existence. Whether in the breath-taking beauty of wild Scotland or at the surface spoilt yet intact nature of urbanity, as a child or adult *mein Dasein ist in meiner Verbindung zu meiner Umwelt*: my presence is in my connection to the world that encircles my existence. All that binds us together, in the cycle of all things. ■

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