

SPIRIT OF THE HIVE. Connecting with the Bees.

I have been around bees on and off for nearly 50 years. I grew up on a small farm and studied agricultural science at university. So my initial approach to bees and beekeeping was that of a conventional farmer or scientist. In recent years, however, I have come to see bees very differently. I now apply a mix of Goethean observation and shamanic meditation techniques to my relationship with bees and I want to share with you some of the insights I have gained from this approach.

Over the years, what started out as passive observation of the bees has become active two-way communication. The bees tell me what they need in physical terms and the Spirit of the Bee guides me at deeper levels. In other words, there is a receiving (awareness comes from the Bee to me) and a giving (appropriate care is given by me to the bees). Simultaneous giving and receiving is what bees do when they pollinate: they give life (pollination) and they receive life (nutriment).

One comes to realise that this giving and receiving is not done on a conditional basis -I will give to you if you give to me- it is done because it is the intrinsic nature of the Bee to do these things. As in so much else, the Bee in this matter is Zen-like; the exchange is not a result of forcing or negotiation. It is spontaneous and selfless.

It's easy to imagine exchanges with another when that other is embodied in one single whole, one corpus, like you or me. But the bee colony is not like that: its edges are much more blurred. This can make it a little tricky to see 'the Bee', but a Goethean approach can help.

We observe the boundless form of the colony in the phenomenon of swarming, when the bees form a sort of plasma in the air. Similarly, if we look inside the hive, beside the combs, there are other parts of the colony which we cannot see. Some we can smell, such as the hive atmosphere. But there is another atmosphere in a bee colony, a sensibility or character, which we can also sense but cannot see. This character can change from visit to visit and hive to hive.

As we make our observations, it gradually dawns on us that the bee colony is composed of many parts which are physically separable but are functionally united. We see that a whole emerges from these parts. While some of the parts are fixed in space and time -the comb for example- others are not fixed, either in space or in time. Individual bees move in space and live only a short time. Yet they are as much a part of the whole as the comb, and form the fluid part of the coherence that is the bee colony. Along with this 'fluidity-in-unity' comes flexibility: the bee colony is highly flexible in its behavioural responses.

Zooming out a little, the colony is intimately connected with its surroundings: the flowers and trees. But its surroundings are not limited to flowers and trees. Without the sun, for example, there would be no nectar and no bees. So we realise that the sun is an intimate part of the picture. And what else? What of the wider earth and the rest of the cosmos? Where do the connections end?

Gradually, we realise that the colony is part of a much greater whole, a continuity that encompasses all. And, within that All, there is us, for we too are an integral part: of nature, of the cosmos, of All.

So, we have selflessness, emergence, fluidity, flexibility, unity of the colony and overarching unity with the world and the cosmos.

As we perceive these phenomena and take the resultant awareness into our full being, we become aware that the physical world in which the bees operate has behind it a deeper reality.

For simplicity, I shall call this deeper reality the inner worlds, which one might think of as the places where the physical world is created, and from which it emanates.

Modern man has largely lost connection with the inner worlds. But we come to realise that the bees retain that connection. In a sense, bees are less fully incarnated than we are.

Consider, for example, the ease with which a colony disembodies and then re-embodies during swarming. Can you imagine upping and leaving your body, your bones, your skin, and moving off, in a state of plasma, to a new place in which you create a new body? Of course you can't imagine that! But that is exactly what bees do with consummate ease.

Having become aware that the inner worlds might possibly exist -that there might be something else going on- can we verify their existence by entering these worlds? We can, but I must add that it takes practice. I would also add that our experiences of the inner worlds are individual and reflect where we are on our respective paths.

If we enter the inner worlds through the appropriate meditation, the remarkable thing is that we can begin to gain a glimpse of the world as the bees see it. For example, when we look at honeycomb we wonder at its exquisite hexagonal structure. We tell ourselves that this is due to the physics of the wax and the requirements of gaining the maximum cell volume with the minimum of material and no wasted space. All of that is true, of course, but do the bees care for that? Do they perform mathematical calculations and study the laws of physics? Of course not! Let us step back and see if there is a pattern that might be guiding the bees.

When we look around we discover that, in nature, the hexagonal form is ubiquitous. For example, the hexagonal structure we see in quartz crystals, and snowflakes and even in the clay in soils, reflects an underlying molecular structure that is itself hexagonal. These hexagons arrange themselves in layers, so there are layers upon layers of hexagons. In the world of the bees we have the sugar and the water in nectar. Both have an underlying hexagonal structure.

Something that is shared by all these substances is that they are very good at entwining and holding within them other substances. Those substances are held in between the hexagonal layers. One substance that is entwined in this way is light. Think of how quartz and similar minerals dance and play with light.

Now, think in alchemical terms as you follow this path: the sun produces light which plants take in to produce nectar which, in turn, entwines light. The bees use the nectar to produce wax. Would it surprise you to know that wax also has a hexagonal layered structure that entwines light? So, we have light entwined all along this path of being, from the sun to the honeycomb.

At the level of the inner worlds, the level at which the coming into being of these substances really occurs, what does the bee perceive? It perceives layered hexagons, of course! So, in creating the honeycomb, the bees are creating in the physical world what they perceive in the inner world: layered hexagons. It could not be otherwise for a creature that is as intimately connected with the inner worlds as the Bee.

And it is very simple; no maths, no physics, just build what you perceive. But perceive with the inner eye. It's that last bit that is tough for us!

I might add that, when we burn a candle made from beeswax, the light that was entwined within it is released. Thus, the alchemical circle is completed. Except that it is not so much a circle as a lemniscate and it is never quite completed, because the end is ever so subtly different from the beginning. And the end leads to yet another lemniscate, which has moved on just a little from the first, in a creative dance that weaves a new reality.

The lemniscate of the waggle dance is an example of such a dance in the physical world. Moreover, as the bees waggle, there is an interaction between the physical and the inner worlds, similar to the one we saw with the creation of wax and comb. The dance we see performed by the worker bee is mirrored in the inner worlds. This causes a tiny change in the inner worlds, which in turn gives rise to a tiny change in the physical world.

It is this change that conveys to the hive as a whole the knowledge of the nectar source. The vibrations of the comb and the following of the dance by other bees are the physical manifestations of the subtle underlying change.

Subtlety, by the way, is another lesson of the Bee. This subtle interaction between the worlds, the physical and the inner, applies to everything that bees do.

I said these dances never quite finish where they started. That is because, at each turn, something is added. In the outer world the something added may be physical (such as wax or comb) or informational (such as knowledge of a nectar source). At the level of the inner worlds, the something added is love. Each time a dance occurs, love is woven into the fabric of the world.

I don't mean sentimental love, but love that is the force that creates and sustains all that exists. It is the force that in its most delicate form enlivens a flower and, in its most awe-inspiring form, powers the sun and the stars. The bee encapsulates this creative, life-giving, force of love in all it does.

Another name for this love, this energy, on the inner planes, is light. Light and love are different forms of the same energy. When we burn a beeswax candle and release light we

also release love. This is one reason why burning a candle made of beeswax gives a very different atmosphere from burning a candle made of paraffin wax.

So, at the level of the inner worlds, we have dances, love and light. There is also singing; the singing of creation. Sadly, if in deep meditation you watch the dance and listen to the singing, you notice there is something missing. There are very few people participating.

This is a problem. The dancing and singing create our physical reality. If mankind does not participate in this creation, then mankind cannot be surprised if the reality that results is uncomfortable for people. Already we see imbalances in the world that adversely affect all of us, and affect much that we care about. Trying to fix these imbalances solely at the physical level will not work. The soul of the earth needs more than that.

Our participation is desperately needed on the inner levels if the earth is to be rebalanced. The good news is that the Bee stands ready to take our hand and show us how to do this, how to dance and how to sing, how to create, with love and light. We should accept the invitation of the Bee and join the dance. In words brought to us by Günther Mancke:

'For the healing of the bees,
for the healing of the earth,
for the healing of man.'

Gareth John, 2018

This is the text of a talk given by the author at the Learning from the Bees conference at Doorn in the Netherlands in September 2018. Used with permission of the author.