

The language we use to speak of the world and its creatures has gained a certain analytical power (along with a lot of expertish pomp) but has lost much of its power to designate what is being analyzed or to convey any respect or affection or devotion towards it.

Wendell Berry

The bees have brought me much joy, some pain, many riddles. Having spent thousands of hours peering into their hives, scrutinizing combs, drawing conclusions, feeling certain, feeling baffled, all I know is that I know very little. But our relationship is deep, and holds promise, despite my not-knowing.

The mysterious and utterly splendid form of the orbit of Venus over the course of the year makes as little “sense” to me as the life of the bees in the course of the year; both fill me with awe and wonder, the paths of the planets, the path of the queen through the combs, her wondrous travels through what we blithely call the ‘brood nest’, the hive’s inner sanctum, so unsacred to us today.

I think about them incessantly, I savour them, I wonder at their perfection, their purpose, seek their company, and frankly, I revel in their love. The love of them – that is the only thing I am certain of – even though it’s unlikely that anyone will ever identify it as real, as measurable, as detectable in a laboratory. Never mind. Living things need new ways of perceiving, this the bees have taught me, more than any other animal. In their hallowed company, one may feel encouraged to enter into dialogue with the world of the invisible, the world of spirit. Our ordinary “objectifying” consciousness cannot do them justice, they will simply elude us.

Personally, I have been privileged to sense their stature as beings of love vividly. I know many others who have experienced this. Such things change us. Such things are pure grace. Nothing we read, study, hear about bees, prepares us for the love of them. For their astounding ability to enchant, to offer experiences of transcendence, to make our spirits soar. Perhaps this too will change, as we learn to give voice to what they mean to us, and how they change our lives.

Rudolf Steiner said that “Through the fact that in bees the love life is suppressed, suppressed until it only remains in the one queen, the sexual life in the hive is transmuted into all the instincts that the bees develop among themselves... And so, like a substance permeating the whole hive, we can have there what is actually only expressed in us when our heart develops love. The entire hive is actually suffused with love. The individual bees forgo love to a great extent and develop love in the whole colony. Thus we begin to understand the life of the bee when it becomes clear to us that bees live in an atmosphere that is completely impregnated by love.”

We begin to understand the life of bees... there is so much we don’t know even though they are probably the most intensely researched animal under the sun. Acknowledging this helps one hold back, not mess with them. We make grave mistakes when we mess with them; the bees have to utilise enormous self-healing powers to make up for it. Healing powers that they would otherwise bestow on the world. It took me many years to stop meddling in their wisdom-filled life altogether. It took me years to discard the baggage of preconceived ideas, prejudice,

atomistic concepts of bee life. The stuff of beekeeping books, and of course, much of bee science. Changing oneself, one's mind, one's heart, is hard work. We know that we all have to do it as we face the consequences of our inability to care for living things.

Until relatively recently, not attending to your bees in the normal ways of beekeeping felt counter-cultural, irresponsible. What about disease? Social responsibility? Honey? This will change as we change and are changed by the bees and challenged to train our souls for different ways of perceiving.

The bees in their wholeness – in the fulsome context of their world into which the creature expands every spring and summer – really do need our undivided attention. We have diminished their world severely and yet we continue to want things from them. A beekeeping 'ceasefire' would be helpful. The bees clearly need a break from us, from our hard and fast ideas, our rapaciousness, our crazy notions of what is good for them. Living in peace is good for them, as is living on the fruits of their labours, of that we may be sure.

I often tell the bees that we know that we need them. Perhaps to encourage them to keep going, even though it's clear to me that they don't need encouragement. An elevated being knows its mission. And challenges us to comprehend it spiritually as well as physically. This is a tall order.

I dreamed that the bees were extinct and that honey was a fabled memory, except for jars hoarded by ancient wealthy gourmets says Matthew Sweeney in one of his poems. The consciousness of the poet, the artist, lends itself to reading 'the signs of the time' and express it in ways both more gentle and more persuasive than any dire predictions based on statistics and measurements.

Have we hope? Hope to perceive what's really happening with the bees? Hope to enjoy, in time to come, the privilege of sharing our lives with such a sublime creature? Bees transform everything they gather into something higher, into healing substance. Will they be with us for ever after? I think that there is hope if we let them help us. There is so much to learn from the bees. They challenge us to expand and enrich our ways of knowing. To learn to perceive with our hearts their truth, their beauty and their goodness. We must thank them. Always thank them.