If you are looking for reasons to believe that humans can find a way through the unfolding catastrophe, this is your book, your hope, your answer.

— Kathleen Dean Moore, author of *Great Tide Rising* and *Wild Comfort*

Why are we in such a predicament? The contributors to this volume trace our discontents to a kind of cultural amnesia. In our rush to progress, we have forgotten deeper sources of wisdom, and with it the calm awareness that humankind is a part of the larger community of life in the unfolding cosmic story. We've been looking for meaning, as it were, in all the wrong places. From varied perspectives, the essays here shed the bright light of remembrance and reverence.

— David Orr, author of *Hope is an Imperative*, *Down to the Wire*, and *Ecological Literacy*

This book is a celebration of the diversity of ways in which humans can relate to the world around them, and an invitation to its readers to partake in planetary coexistence. Innovative, informative, and highly accessible, this interdisciplinary anthology brings together scholars and educators across the sciences and humanities, in a collaborative effort to illuminate the different ways of being in the world and the different kinds of knowledge they entail— from the ecological knowledge of indigenous communities, to the scientific knowledge of a biologist, and the embodied knowledge communicated through storytelling.

This anthology examines the interplay between Nature and Culture in the sense of our current age of ecological crisis, stressing the importance of addressing these ecological crises occurring around the planet through multiple perspectives. These perspectives are exemplified through diverse case studies— from the political and ethical implications of thinking with forests, to the capacity of storytelling to motivate action, to the worldview of the Indigenous Okanagan community in British Columbia.

Living Earth Community is essential reading not only for researchers and students, but for anyone interested in the ways humans interact with the community of life on Earth, especially during this current period of environmental emergency.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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There is a poetic phrase commonly known in the north Indian region of Braj: *pritama prita hi te peyi*, which means ‘the Beloved is found precisely through love’. I would like to meditate on this seemingly simple sentence for the deeper meaning it has to offer our considerations of multiple ways of being and knowing, particularly as they relate to the living Earth community.

The Krishnaite traditions of Braj are informed by early Hindu Vedantic texts that give philosophical expression to an understanding of all life as simultaneously radically unified and bountifully diversified. This is recognized as the *siddantik* perspective that provides the philosophical basis for understanding the true nature of all life. Since accounts of creation are productive points of entry into the general worldview of a particular tradition, I begin with the emergent understanding of creation that is encountered in the foundational Vedantic texts, the Upanishads.

One of the major tenets of Vedantic religious philosophy is non-duality (*advaita*). Principal Upanishadic texts recount that in the beginning the One Ultimate Reality (*Brahman, atman, purusha*) was lonely and bored, as there is not much joy in playing with one’s self alone (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4*).\(^1\)

Hence, the One desired others, and, as a result, divided itself and proceeded to interact with itself in a multitude of manifest forms (*nama-rupa*). Through this creative process, the unmanifest One

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produced out of itself the manifold world of all entities, both animate and inanimate. Accordingly, everything in the world is concurrently non-different and different, one and many. Although difference is acknowledged — and even celebrated — sharp ontological divides do not exist. It is all Brahman, for the fundamental Upanishads declare: ‘this whole world is Brahman’. Significantly, the sacred totality includes a manifest (adhibhautik) as well as an unmanifest (adhyatmik) dimension. In contrast to, for example, a Calvinistic view, there are no impenetrable boundaries between the supreme reality (Brahman or God) and the visible world. As it says in the important Vedantic text the Bhagavad Gita, ‘God is everything’ (7:19). Therefore, everything in the world is a part of the ultimate Whole, and, as such, is sacred. Animated presence pervades everything. The religious studies scholar Emma Tomalin calls this ‘bio-divinity’, the notion that Nature is infused with animated divinity, an idea widespread in India for a very long time. An intellectual understanding of the siddhantik philosophical assertion that a sacred presence pervades everything, however, is not enough; it must be realized. And this leads us to another important perspective: the bhavatmik.

Bhavatmik is an adjective meaning the perspective ‘whose essence is bhava’. The key term in this compound is bhava, a complex Sanskrit word with multiple dictionary meanings that include a state of mind, manner of being, way of thinking or feeling, emotion, attitude, affection, disposition, or realization. In the Braj Krishnaite traditions, this word is best and most simply translated as ‘love’. It is this term I had in mind in assigning the title to this short essay. A common way of expressing the goal of the Braj religious traditions is with the word sarvatma-bhava, which I would render as ‘a loving realization of the divine in everything’. The crucial question is: how does one actually come to know the sacred or divine presence in some living entity? I return to the poetic phrase that I began with; the answer is precisely

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through love. When someone approaches us with aggression, shouting with rage in our face, we tend to pull back protectively and conceal ourselves. On the other hand, when someone approaches us with tender love, we are drawn out and reveal much more of ourselves. Might it be this way with all entities?

Conversations with religious practitioners in Braj suggest that it might indeed. There is a common thread that runs through hundreds of interviews I have had with worshippers of sacred rivers, trees, and mountains in northern India. Many reported that what formerly seemed like an ‘ordinary’ river, tree, or mountain revealed its divine nature or true sacred form (svarupa) after a period of interacting with that entity through loving acts of worship (seva). I met a young man on the bank of the Yamuna after watching him perform a very moving worship of the river. He explained to me how he had come to this: ‘I used to see Yamuna-ji as an ordinary river and treat it badly. But then I met my guru, and he told me to start worshiping Yamuna-ji. At first I was a little resistant, but I did what he said. Soon, I began to see her svarupa (true divine form) and realized how wonderful (adbhut) she really is. So now I worship her everyday with love. The main benefit of worshiping Yamuna-ji is an ever-expanding love. I want to live in her world of love’.5 This man suggests something very important. Loving attitudes and actions lead to a perspectival awakening; through a reverent approach one comes to know the true nature of some entity in a manner that exceeds mere intellectual knowledge. Once that true nature is revealed and one has an experience of its marvelousness, one enters spontaneously into an appreciative and worshipful attitude, and engages naturally in acts of loving care.

This is a common story. A woman I met who lovingly revered a neem tree daily with worshipful acts of service told me the result of this was that ‘Mother revealed herself to me, which has led me to a very close relationship with her. I cannot now ever imagine cutting a living tree’.6 A woman who worships a stone from Mount Govardhan in her home

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every day reported that after some time, this stone revealed its svarupa, or true nature, and that this has led to a deep relationship in which the stone sometimes even talks to her. ‘Before I began my worship, I never imagined how truly wonderful these stones were’.\(^7\) During my visits to an outdoor shrine housing a stone from Mount Govardhan, a man I spoke with explained: ‘When people lovingly decorate a Giriraj shila (Govardhan stone) and worship it, the personality comes out. Look, there are many Giriraj shilas here, but the svarupa is really showing itself in this one (svarupa nikal deta hai) because people have added eyes and decorations, and have worshiped it’.\(^8\) Love is both a way of acting and an emotional state of being, and loving attitudes and actions are the very doorway into an insightful world of realization; they are concrete levers for opening up new perspectives. This is what I mean by ‘affectual insight’. Many claim that through love the face of the Beloved is available in every entity.

This sense of the value of loving relationality has also been underscored by some important western scientific thinkers. For example, the 1983 Nobel Prize winning biologist Barbara McClintock promoted a ‘feeling for the organism’ as a crucial element in knowing it.\(^9\) She called herself a ‘mystic in science’ and endorsed a form of attention based on loving relationship as a way of seeing things not available to the more aggressive approaches represented by such figures as Francis Bacon. In seeming agreement, Norman Brown promotes Alfred North Whitehead’s notion of ‘a science based on an erotic sense of reality rather than an aggressive, dominating attitude towards reality’.\(^10\)

How does one develop a loving connection with the living Earth community that leads to affectual insight into its true nature or divine presence (svarupa)? Though the whole world is sacred, human beings are not good at connecting with abstract universalities. We are embodied beings designed to connect with tangible particularities. Our

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\(^8\) Ibid., p. 208.


nature is such that our most powerful relationships are with specific, individual beings. Universal love, for example, is a noble sentiment, but it cannot begin to compare to the passionate engagement with the intimate love of a particular person. Intimate interaction with natural entities in northern India tends to be directed toward individual trees, rivers, and stones. There is an element of personal possession (mamata) in matters of love, as ‘this is my child’ or ‘here is my lover’. A woman who maintains a Govardhan stone shrine in her home confirmed this viewpoint with a familiar example: ‘There are many men in the world who are husbands, but the one who lives in this house is my husband. Likewise, there are many Giriraj shilas, but this one (gesturing to the Govardhan stone in her home shrine) is mine’.

But as love of a particular matures with concomitant knowledge, the scope of that love tends to broaden, just as people with no prior regard for dogs tend to look at dogs differently once they become friends with one particular dog.

The possibility of reverent interaction with a particular entity opening up to a more universal reverence was highlighted for me during an instructive conversation. One day I visited a large peepul tree shrine in Varanasi, and there I met a woman who was a sadhvi, a female practitioner who had renounced ordinary domestic life to devote herself to spiritual pursuits. At one point in our conversation, she explained what she thought was the real value of worshiping a tree: ‘From the heartfelt worship of a single tree, one can see the divinity in that tree and feel love (bhava) for it. After some time, with knowledge one can then see the divinity in all trees. Really, in all life. All life is sacred because God is everywhere and in everything. This tree is a svarupa of Vasudeva (Krishna). As it says in the Bhagavad Gita, from devotion to a svarupa (one’s own particular sacred form of God) comes awareness of the vishvarupa (universal form of God)’. In brief, this knowledgeable woman was advancing the idea that the love of a particular has the possibility of opening up a more reverent attitude toward the universal. Regarding trees, her point was that loving interaction with a particular tree could lead to the realization of the sacrality of all trees — and by extension, of all life. With the

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11 Haberman, Loving Stones, p. 198.
12 Haberman, People Trees, p. 197.
comprehension of the universal via the particular, we return full circle to the notion of *sarvatma-bhava*, the idea that everything is sacred. What first began as a proposition, is now deeply realized through affectual experience.

I close by suggesting that a new and special kind of love is available to us during these challenging times; a possibility is being offered to us that has perhaps never existed before. This may be the great redeeming feature of this troubled age of massive extinction, the silver lining in the proverbial dark cloud of our times. It is a love that is both astonishingly sweet and extremely urgent. Earth is singing us a special love song, if we can only open our hearts to hear it.

Today, we have the possibility of loving the living Earth community, of loving old-growth forests for example, in a manner that has perhaps never been possible before, for we now experience them at once as overwhelmingly beautiful and as *tremendously vulnerable*. The powerful, vibrant forests that frightened the early Puritans when they landed on the eastern seaboard and led them to conquer and clear-cut them have now been replaced by forests vastly diminished — and perhaps even dying. Much of the success of the great work we are being called to depends on understanding the nature of and embodying this special love. Although as a lifelong student of religion I would insist that love is fundamentally unified, I want to assert that the love we seem to be called to today has a dual nature: it is a boundlessly joyful love, and it is an affectionately concerned love. It is somewhat similar to the love a parent feels for a child ill with a life-threatening disease: the parent feels deeply moved by the child’s smile while simultaneously being aware that the disease may take the child before her time. The intensity of the love is increased by the vulnerability of the child, and now so much of the living Earth community is endangered. The joyful dimension of this love has to do with opening ourselves to a power and wondrous presence in the world beyond even our greatest knowledge. The caring dimension of this love has to do with being sensitively attentive to the needs of particular threatened forms of life. This insightful, tender love offers a pathway to a deeper way of knowing and a more sensible way of being in the world today. Long live the whole living Earth community!
Bibliography


