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New principles to live by: and a change of skin

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of what matters and what is made to matter — the ethics of encounters in the intimate entwining of ontology and epistemology. Within an ethics based on matter and mattering, it explores the evolving symbiotic entanglement of humans with each other and with non-human beings, who, with us, make up the world. Our complex symbiotic relationality is discussed in relation to the limiting force of neoliberalism, where all that matters is economic growth and productivity. It asks what hope there is for the survival of the planet, when so many humans, including politicians of almost every stripe, have lost the capacity to think outside the neoliberal box. As things stand, as one scientist observed, it is as if we have a medical, terminal diagnosis, and, although there is a cure, we choose to ignore it. It asks what are those cures and explores the possibility that we humans might learn to respond — to be responsible to our planet, in its state of terminal distress.

Keywords: Ethics; encounters; neoliberalism; sustainable development; emergent listening

The first act of life is breath, feeling and being, the second act is what remains of us. Hands that hold others softly; bodies that sit heavily in space and leave grooves in the seats we've sat in; whole rooms in hearts that we touch. As artists, we are forever reaching out only to leave something behind. (Jovanovic, 2023, p. 23)

Humans, individually and collectively, are part of the matter of the world — the matter *with* the world some might say. We are entangled in the human and more-than-human mattering of the world. What we do, and what we say/write/listen to, has material effects. We are not above the world, and supreme, as we once thought, but *of* it. We affect the matter of it, and it affects us. What we are, contrary to the tenets of liberalism and neoliberalism, is relational, and how we relate matters. How we respond within the intricate tangles of relationality that make up our individual and collective lives forms the (im)possibility of an ethical basis of existence.

A possible ethical basis for living, yes, for all of us, and yet impossible, perhaps, for those who have taken up as their own the concepts and practices of neoliberalism, or who have buried their heads in wilful ignorance — though ignorance is, of course, not always wilful. Many of us study and work in institutions so neoliberalised that we cannot imagine any other way to be. And, unpractised as we are at seeing discourse at work on us and on our desire, we often do not realise we have been taken captive within a limited and limiting set of thoughts and practices. Reflexive awareness of the shaping of ourselves as particular kinds of subjects, even when our powers of action are being curtailed, is always elusive (Davies *et al.*, 2004). To develop such awareness, we

need collective conversations that resist clichés and platitudes and that work towards the development of counter discourses. We had many such conversations in the 1970s that were both confronting and exhilarating.

Existence, in Barad's analysis, is *ethico-onto-epistemological*. Ethics, she argues, contrary to the way it is conceptualised and practiced in neoliberal institutions, cannot be separated from what we do, and what we say, in each and every encounter. Justice depends on our capacity, she argues, to acknowledge the other, whether they be human or other than human; it depends on our willingness to recognise others and on our capacity to pay them loving attention:

Justice, which entails acknowledgment, recognition, and loving attention, is not a state that can be achieved once and for all. There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly (Barad, 2007, p. x).

This paper is an invitation to you, to us, together, to intra-act, to affect each other, to breathe life into new possibilities for each other, and for the planet. It is a search for ways of being responsible/response/able in the face of global warming. It offers a challenge to those of us who cannot think outside neoliberalism and its values, to open ourselves to the danger we face, globally, if we cannot discover how to think and act differently.

Contrary to the neoliberal belief that there can, and should be, no end to development, Leff (2021, p. 209) writes about the 'shock to the ontological security of modernity', which emerged in the 1970s. In that decade, we recognised that *there are limits to growth*: 'not only was the supremacy of man over all other creatures of the planet and the right to dominate and exploit Nature for his own profit interrogated, but also the very meaning of human existence that has been grounded in economic growth and technological progress' (Leff, 2021, p. 210).

The revolutionary potential of that shock in the 1970s was squandered — suffocated — by the Harvard-based development and implementation of neoliberal governmentality. Economic growth was reinstalled as an unquestionable good, and responsibility was reformulated as unquestioning dedication to growth, at whatever personal cost (Davies, 2020; Sklar, 1980).

If we listen to quantum physics, as Barad so beautifully lays it out for us, we come to understand, in marked contrast, that the world and its possibilities are remade in each encounter. It must be possible, then, to recover our ability, our will, to act responsibly/response-ably, despite the stranglehold neoliberalism has had on us since the 1980s and 1990s.

Barad asks: 'How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter? How to understand what is entailed in the practice of meeting that might help keep the possibility of justice alive in a world that seems to thrive on death?' (Barad, 2007, p. x).

She invites us to engage in an ongoing, emergent state of openness and aliveness, even while there are forces working against that — forces coming from ourselves, and through ourselves, both singly and collectively.

Those competing forces are evident in the newly elected Labor government in Australia. It was elected on a promise and a hope of averting global warming. They were open and alive, it seemed, to the possibilities of change — to the contribution Australia might make to the task of restoring our suffering planet. In government, however, they appear to be astonishingly satisfied with the perpetuation of the neoliberal status quo. In defence of that status quo, they utter weasel words to justify their ongoing commitment to the kind of productivity neoliberalism endorses, along with its attendant harm.

[My apologies to weasels, but the term weasel, as it is applied to humans, is particularly apt for what I want to say here. Wikipedia gives the definition of human weasels as those who engage in deception and irresponsibility; they are sneaky, untrustworthy, and insincere; as a verb it means to

manipulate shiftily; and the phrase ‘to weasel out’, means ‘to squeeze one’s way out of something’ or ‘to evade responsibility’.]

We have to go on digging up coal, the minister for the environment and water opines, because if they do not have our ‘clean coal’ in India they will buy dirty coal elsewhere. And in case that does not convince you that it is right for us to subsidise the opening of new mines, let me tell you that if they have no coal in India the poor will suffer terrible hardship. The weaselly message, intended to quell bursts of concern for the planet, is: good old Australia is the hero to the rescue of the poor in India.

This weaselly reasoning is similar to the justification of the brutal, offshore indefinite-detention of refugees. Our concern for humanity, they argue, forces us to be brutal to those refugees we hold in captivity, since that is the only way to save more refugees from drowning at sea. (It is, of course, not the only way, and perpetual brutalising of the innocent can never be justified).

Are these the wily, weaselly words of deliberate deception? I tend to believe they are when my anger gets the better of me. Of course, their words could just be ignorance, willful or otherwise . . .

To be fair, and despite the unquestioned dominance of neoliberal discourse on our thinking, we are all subjected to multiple discourses — discourses of hope, for example, and multiple forms of rationality. What rationality, we must ask, enables a new government, promising to positively address climate change, to argue for, and engage in its opposite? For indeed ‘Labor continues to approve and finance gas expansion and astronomical levels of pollution — with 116 coal and gas mines slated for development and billions of dollars in subsidies still being directed to ecological collapse’ (Abbatangelo, 2023, p. 4).

Wanting to be in government for more than one term is one justification that is offered. Another flies under the flag of ‘sustainable development’, where they do the opposite of what they promised — and perhaps even what they want. ‘Sustainable’ is the term that bows towards one force, the discourse and stark evidence of climate change. It suggests that the planet can be saved. It tells us that we can all calm down, trusting the government to marshal the know-how that will avert climate change. ‘Development’, however, is the action, and the belief, that informs ‘sustainable development’ strategies. It is based on the economic ideal of continual growth — the *sine qua non* of neoliberal governmentality.

According to Leff, the economic rationality of growth as an unquestionable good, depends on ‘a permanently growing consumption of natural resources (matter and energy), which . . . runs up against the limits of the planet’s provision, productivity, and renewal of resources’ (Leff, 2021, pp. 210–211). This rationality inevitably hastens, he argues, the process of entropic death and disorder: ‘the promise of unlimited growth and the self-complacency of the economic system [has] resulted in an unsustainable economic process [that] . . . triggers, unleashes and exacerbates the *entropic degradation of the planet*’ (Leff, 2021, p. 4–5 emphasis in original).¹

Calling something sustainable (which is what the people want), when in fact you mean business-as-usual, engaging in continuous and destructive development, is one of neoliberal’s favourite strategies. We were fooled by that strategy in universities, for example, in the 1990s, when university managers called the assessment of our research an assessment of its quality, when all that was ever going to be assessed was its quantity. As Stanley Fish observed of this form of deception, ‘No matter the concept presented, it will still produce the outcome predetermined by the unchanged philosophy’ (cited in Nyuon, 2023, p. 7).

Abbatangelo laments the way government and mainstream environmental organisations have been drawn into supporting programs directed towards sustainable development. Such programs include the so-called safeguard mechanisms of biodiversity credits and biodiversity offsets. These mechanisms are, he argues, a blatant ‘attempt to commodify nature into products that can be bought and sold. . . . [whose] design is to keep the economy growing forever’ (Abbatangelo, 2023, p. 4).

Meanwhile, those of us who were around in the 1970s, lament the loss of the revolutionary force was unleashed in that decade. Christine Milne, for example, one time leader of the Australian Greens, despairs at the newly elected government’s entrapment in neoliberal thought and practice:

In the '70s, it was very clear that we lived on a finite planet and that you cannot have infinite economic growth based on extracting resources. We knew that there were limits to extraction, consumption and dumping of waste. We knew our biodiversity and ecosystems mattered. As neoliberalism took hold, though, it moved from a mentality of preventing the damage, to one of committing the damage, managing it in a 'sustainable' way and then dreaming up market-based solutions to 'repair' it... [In the name of 'sustainability', governments claim] they can have new and expanded mines and developments anywhere, anytime and anyhow. And the environmental movement embraces this instead of pushing back. (Christine Milne, in Abbatangelo, 2023, p. 4)

So what is neoliberalism? It was in the early 1990s that Australia was launched, willy-nilly, into the neoliberal form of government that we are now both environmentally and ethically crippled by. Following the lead of Thatcher (of 'there's no such thing as society' fame) and of Reagan's so-called 'neoconservatism', social and environmental consciousness and conscience, which had begun to flourish in the '70s, was rejected in favour of the economic values of growth and productivity, fuelled by competition, individualism and pathologizing of difference and of critique. Under the banner of small government, public companies were privatised, the public service gutted in favour of highly paid consultants, while surveillance of private citizens was massively intensified.

In the newly installed neoliberal world, social and economic rights were no longer counted as legitimate human rights; in a market-based, competitive framework it was every one for him- or herself, pitted against all others. Rabid exploitation of the poor was approved as the natural spoils of competition. In such a world, individuals inevitably struggle to find the means to be 'open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action', or to be open to the possibilities that such meetings open up for living justly (Barad, 2007, p. x). Neoliberal governmentality lays out in excruciating detail what behaviors will be rewarded. We are trained like dogs with multiple small rewards for our compliance, and so learn how to ignore the harm we are doing.

The Guardian newspaper invited top Australian scientists to comment in the Opinion column (25th July, 2023) on the monstrous and deadly heatwaves overtaking parts of Asia, Europe and North America. Bill Hare, physicist and climate scientist and chief executive of Climate Analytics, commented that we now know, as a result of these events, that even 1.2C of global warming isn't safe: 'Driving all this is the fossil fuel industry. Enabling it are political leaders unwilling to bring this industry under control and who promote policies such as offsetting and massive gas expansion that simply enable this industry to continue'.

Prof Ian Lowe, emeritus professor in the School of Science at Griffith University, recalled the scientific community warning of the possible link between greenhouse gas production and climate change back in 1985: 'Now all the projected changes are happening, so I reflect on how much needless environmental damage and human suffering will result from the work of those politicians, business leaders and public figures who have prevented concerted action. History will judge them very harshly'.

Professor Lesley Hughes, board member of the Climate Change Authority and an emeritus professor at Macquarie University, hit the nail on the head when she wrote: 'It's as if the human race has received a terminal medical diagnosis and knows there is a cure, but has consciously decided not to save itself'.

And there are many known cures. We can, for example, dismantle the belief that never-ending growth is desirable — or even possible; we can stop generating carbon dioxide from the use of fossil fuels; we can stop logging old growth forests; we can stop generating the toxic methane gas caused by burying food waste in landfill, and instead recycle our own food waste by turning it into valuable compost; we can increase tree planting in rural and urban areas and protect the trees already there; we can outlaw built-in, short-life technology; we can upscale our recycling technology and ensure recycling systems are readily available to everyone; we can develop new

building regulations that insist on passive heating and cooling; we can join unions to develop collective strength to pressure government to address climate change; we can reduce our meat-eating and stop using unrecyclable materials; we can mend our clothes instead of discarding them; we can demand that supermarkets make available to us the irregularly shaped fruit and vegetables that farmers currently discard; we can shop more carefully, buying only what we need; we can say no to plastic, providing our own bags and containers; we can take every available opportunity (and create new ones) to let politicians know that what they are doing is not good enough; and we can work on our collective awareness of, and care for, each other — on our capacity for loving kindness.

I come back to the question, then, is our decision not to save ourselves and the planet simply willful ignorance? Is it a death wish for the planet? Surely not . . . Then what is it that has caught us in this dangerous impasse? Is it just the economic rationality of growth and the system of government it dictates, which none of us know how to escape?

Clinging to the already known

As Wohlleben so beautifully demonstrates, forests have the power to counteract global warming. Yet even as global warming ratchets up, foresters continue to chop down the very trees that are vital players in the forests' capacity to cool itself — and to cool the planet. When the foresters' plantations inevitably die off in the face of rising temperatures and fires and drought, the foresters turn, within the blink of an eye, to the logging of old growth forests, justifying that destruction with neoliberal discourses — the discourses that have turned societies into economies, and live trees into marketable products.

The pandemic forced some of us to reconsider many of our taken-for-granted practices and beliefs. The advent of global warming also, plainly, demands a major rethinking and redoing. Our responses to the pandemic demonstrated how stubbornly attached so many of us are to old patterns of thought and action — how attached we are, many of us, to the myths of individualism, and to competition as the key to survivability (Davies, 2022a). Even pre-pandemic, we had come face to face with just how aggressive some of us can become in the face of challenges to our habituated ways of thinking-in-being (Davies, 2022b).

There is a great deal of verbal inventiveness dedicated to denial of immanent planetary catastrophe. Even those who turn their faces towards the problem, may define it as simply a matter of potential human extinction — which is, after all, a fearful enough thought. But the danger is much greater than the loss of one apex predator, which is after all, what we are. Not that apex predators are unimportant, let me not argue that.

But we are apex predators who have got things badly wrong, and it is possible to wonder whether the planet would do better without us. Even so, apex predators, perhaps including humans, can be vital players in the balancing of ecosystems. Take wolves for example. Their value for forests became evident in Yellowstone National Park in the USA, after they had been eradicated and then re-introduced. The re-introduction of the wolves 'affected the behaviour of the elk, which in turn changed the vegetation composition along rivers, with flow-on impacts for beavers, insects and other species. These changes helped re-establish balance in an ecosystem that was struggling due to excessive browsing of elk on sensitive river vegetation' (Macbeth, 2023, p. 29). In Australia, goannas are apex predators that are virtually eradicated with similar dire impacts on the forests where they once lived and hunted.

As for us, all 8 billion of us, we are still here, and we are behaving badly, destroying ecosystems in the name of productivity. Further, we are willing to harm each other to save ourselves from having to evolve. 'Spin doctors' are paid enormous sums, especially by politicians and mining companies, to generate catch phrases that will sweep us along with justifications for the maintenance of the status quo. Wohlleben (2023) tells us of professional foresters who have lately

been using such strategies to tighten their hold on their habituated ways of doing forestry. Some have banded together, calling themselves the ‘Foresters4Future’ movement. They continue the same old practices, destroying forests they claim to care for, and they secure government subsidies for that work. If they only remove a few trees, and then leave the forest alone, Wohlleben argues, the forest can regenerate itself, but that is not what they are now doing as global warming events intensify:

In all the places that are now being left alone, the forest is reacting vigorously and new trees are immediately starting to grow. Only where everything has been cleared away, where the soil is warming up under the full force of the summer sun, where the forest floor has been flattened by machinery, and where barely any hummus remains is the forest itself actually dying.

... the government handouts raining down on these clear-cuts will, unfortunately, do nothing to stop those responsible from continuing to do what they are doing. (Wohlleben, 2023, p. 164)

What we need, says Wohlleben, is not massive government handouts to enable the continuation of the same destructive forestry practices, but *the knowledge and the will* to allow the forests to become healthy and resilient again. The handouts are used to clear out the existing damaged forest and start again with a new plantation of trees intended for the sawmill. Curiously, this relationship between governments and foresters continues, even when it turns out, in fact, to be an economic failure:

Every trunk stripped of its branches and dragged out of the forest is a testament to economic failure. Had the trunk been left in the forest, it would have offered a home to countless tiny creatures; it would have stored water and cooled the air around it. After many decades, it would finally have decomposed into humus and enriched life in the soil for centuries. Looking at the forest from an ecological perspective was and still is completely foreign to the political decision-makers. How else could they fund a huge undertaking to clear ‘damaged timber’, which is how they refer to this valuable biomass? (Wohlleben, 2023, p. 166)

The trees too then have been individualised and pathologised just as humans have under neoliberalism. In universities, if the managers cannot see the immediate value of you, in the terms they already understand and are committed to, you are of no use and must be discarded. And when we no longer make profit from the plantations that are dying off in the face of climate change, we do not hesitate to redirect the foresters to the old forests: ‘Here they can find mighty oaks and beeches that still command good prices on the market’ (Wohlleben, 2023, p. 170). And what happens then when the foresters are let loose on the old forests that they claim to protect?

... the old trees left standing suffer in the bright sunlight that now hits their trunks. The delicate beech, with its smooth bark, is well known for its susceptibility to sunburn. The bark splits, exposing the sensitive wood, and fungi and bacteria immediately move in. The giants’ fate is sealed and they will die within a few years... (Wohlleben, 2023, p. 171)

It seems obvious that the logging of old growth forest must cease, a commitment many governments pay lip-service to; but because the primary, and only, value of neoliberal governments is growth and productivity, it continues with what it ‘knows’ it should not do.

Neoliberalism fosters a selective blindness to outcomes. The foresters, whose job is to protect forests, will fight for their ‘rights’ to continue earning their livelihood from their (often illegal) destruction. In Romania, for example, where timber is supplied to such companies as IKEA, those

who stand in the way of illegal logging may be brutally murdered (Wohlleben, 2023, p. 174). There are even some scientists, as Wohlleben painstakingly documents, who collude with governments and forest agencies, by providing false statistics that can be used to justify the continuation of those practices that will ultimately lead to the death of the planet.

It is not uncommon, in my experience, that the neoliberal policy of forcing scientists to turn to the commercial world to fund their research, leads researchers to produce false results to satisfy their funders. I have had colleagues whose livelihood and research has been threatened if they do not change their results to say what the funder wants to hear. I have had the same pressure brought to bear on my own research.

In the long stretch of history, it is probably true to say we have never been so much on our own, since the individualising and pathologising of us by neoliberal forms of governmentality. Within neoliberal systems, an individual must compete to survive, shape up as the individual the employer (or funder) thinks it wants, that is, as an individual who can, year after year, be ever more productive, as an individual who will not argue with the system or institution that presses him or her so ruthlessly. Rather, individuals have learned to turn their critical gaze inward, seeing themselves as one who is at risk of not making it, who is perhaps too weak to make it, who is ever able to be construed as a pathological failure, if s/he fails to meet the ever-increasing demands.

Survival is thus individualised under neoliberalism, though I also noticed, particularly in the 1990s, that if the threat of individual non-survival proved to be insufficient pressure to bring about willing compliance, it became their department, or even their entire institution, that would be unable to survive without their compliance. When the trowel was really laying the pressure on thick, it was the entire nation that would not survive unless individuals complied with the new demands for increasing productivity. At the same time, the systems that were un/doing us were made unanalysable, and unrevisable; critique was death. 'Growth' is still innocently tossed around as an unquestionable good; the intensifying of individual vulnerability remains a perfect recipe for shutting down thought.

With a deeper history than neoliberalism, there is, as well, the human capacity for willful ignorance that allows dangerous and destructive activity to flourish. Stanley Milgram's studies, conducted in the 1960s, were influenced by the events of the Holocaust, and in particular the trial of Adolf Eichmann, who pleaded his innocence on the grounds that he was a good man who was simply following orders. Could otherwise good individuals, Milgram asked, really do serious harm to others if instructed to do so by someone in authority? Participants in his experiments were asked to administer electric shocks to subjects who made trivial mistakes. His participants did so without question, obedient to the white-coated scientist, however, distressed they might feel at the evident harm they were doing. They chose to electrocute those subjects in his experiment who were making mistakes, rather than question authority, or the way things were done in the laboratory context.

I too admit to doing harm, even to myself, on occasion, when I have not known how to change the tide of events. There have been times, too, when I did find the way to stop the tide, and I remember each one of those moments vividly, even some that took place almost 70 years ago. None of us are immune from getting swept along in a tide, even when we fear it is wrong. And all of us have the potential to swim out of its powerful flow.

In Australia, politicians and public servants have been witnessed engaging in monstrous behaviour, causing extraordinary harm to others. They have placed refugees, who have fled horrifying regimes, in brutal, isolated forms of indefinite detention (Boochani, 2018); they have colluded with criminals to perpetuate those brutal systems of detention (McKenzie-Murray, 2023); they steal indigenous children from their homes, causing enormous cross-generational pain and grief (Grant, 2017); the 'no campaign' being launched against what Indigenous people have asked for — a voice to parliament enshrined in the constitution — is riddled with egregious post-truth lies and deceptions uttered by those who are seemingly proud of their ability to fool the public into voting no to the recognition of the Indigenous people of this country. And only today,

at the time of writing, it comes to light, in the report of the Robo-debt Royal Commission,² that politicians and public servants have ‘lied, dissembled and participated in the active cover-up of a multi-billion-dollar fraud carried out against more than 400,000 disadvantaged Australians, motivated by “venality, incompetence and cowardice” . . . complicit in one of the most shameful chapters of Australian government history’ (Morton, 2023, p. 01). Their justification was that it would reap billions for government from the purses of the poor. The police too have been witnessed in such harmful activities; they have covered up the violent deaths of gay men, protecting the murderers; and they have dismissed the relentless misogyny that many women face at home and in their workplaces, with one woman a week being killed by her intimate partner (Hill, 2019). And let me not get started on the clergy.

The failure of governments to do what is needed to avert climate change is more of the same.

That neoliberal life as usual, and the willful ignorance it perpetuates, might end life as we know it, requires that we open ourselves to change, to thinking differently, to being open to others and to new thinking. Is that too much to ask? Even for governments, who won elections on the strength of promising action on climate change, it would seem to be too much. As Gergis (2023, p. 7) laments, not only are we ‘knowingly unravelling the only life force known to exist in the entire universe’ but in the last year ‘Australian federal and state governments provided a total of \$11.1 billion in funding and tax breaks to assist fossil fuel industries. . . . [even while legislating a] commitment to cut our emissions 43 per cent by 2030’.

Within the normative thinking of economic rationality, counter-currents generated by concern for the planet inevitably fail, Leff argues, to ‘arrest the overflowing torrent of entropic commodification of the machinery of growth . . .’. We need other principles to live by, he argues, and ‘must forge a new production paradigm and a strategic political program to deconstruct economic rationality while at the same time constructing environmental rationality . . . What is needed is the decolonisation of our minds and a change of skin’ (Leff, 2021, pp. 215, 216).

Searching for environmental rationality: decolonising our minds and changing our skin

Let us step then, out of those discourses and practices that have so thoroughly colonised our lives at the expense of life on planet Earth. Let us begin to recognise some of those other beings with whom our lives are symbiotically entangled. Swanson *et al.* (2017, pp. M4–M5) draw our attention to our dependence on symbiotic entanglements we may not even be aware of — to fungi and bacteria, for example:

Twenty-first-century research on organisms ranging from bacteria to insects to mammals has shown that symbiosis is a near-requirement for life — even for *Homo Sapiens*. . . . our bodies contain more bacterial cells than human ones. Without bacteria, our immune systems do not develop properly. Even reproduction appears to be bacteria enabled.

We are of the world, we are entangled in it, and we are emergent, ‘embedded in the complex, interwoven materiality of the world’ (Davies & Speedy, 2024, p. i). Yet we currently falter in our attempts to rethink ourselves as we are confronted with the climate emergency we have collectively created. We cling to what we know already. In despondent moments, I conclude that it is too hard for us humans to change our ways. Jane Goodall writes books like *The Book of Hope* and makes inspiring films with titles like *Reasons for Hope*. But like David Clarke (2023), who works in Outdoor and Environmental Education at the University of Edinburgh, every now and then, when faced with the extent and the ferocity of resistance to change, I lose hope.

Clarke tells of an altercation in one of his classes, which erupted when he said he did not have hope. His words shocked his students, and they protested. When he wrote about the altercation, he said in small print: ‘I don’t think environmental educators are supposed to say that’. He concluded

his paper, pondering with his students, on the (im)possibility of hope, and on the thisness of lives in which we do not know for sure what matters, even when we are charged with teaching what matters. How can we find the answers, he asks, when there are no certain solutions? And as Barad points out, all we have is the ‘ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting’ (2007, p. x). What was this moment, Clarke asks, the thisness of it, in which he uttered those unsayable words?

The thisness of it. *This* thisness of it. How it doesn’t fit, and you turn it and try again. The room altercation. That, then. The now. What I [Was? This?] said. I took it back. [I took it with me here]. Not 4 minutes later. I *do* have hope. I promise. I mean. I mean to say both I do/n’t. I mean to say . . . I’m just getting by. Not hope for endings, utopian. But for better living — [Where is *living*? Who? How?]. New worlds are always practiced. Environments are always practiced. *This* is it. Thisness as pedagogy. (Clarke, 2023, p. 1)

Unlike snakes who can shed their skin each year — sloughing it right off, human skin is flaky. Our old habits turn out to be destructive in ways we never imagined, and so we flounder in seeking the just thisness of each moment, in shedding old skins, and in becoming open and alive to a planet that is so desperately in need of our loving attention. We turn deaf ears to what we cannot bear to hear, each one individually overwhelmed as we try to think about, to feel our way into, what needs to be done. *Collectively, symbiotically enmeshed with others in the world/of the world*, we must find new ways to be human, shedding our old skins, and our old, habituated sources of comfort.

To gather the energy, the will — the capacity to turn the tide of destruction, we must relearn how to pay close attention to our moment-by-moment encounters with human and more-than-human others. We need to become attuned to the thisness of each moment.

The ethics of each moment, and its potential for justice, emerges from both its relational materiality, and the thought that is being mobilised, with all its potential contradictions. We must learn to attend to the materiality of each encounter, and the thought being mobilised, in order to even begin to become response-able for what is being made to matter, and how is it being made to matter.

Leff’s analysis makes a chillingly strong case that unless we can unhook our subjectivities from the world as it is made through neoliberalism/economic rationalism, we will not be able to save the planet from destruction:

The economic strategy that purports to contain the overflowing of Nature’s downfall degradation by constraining it to the cage of modern rationality has failed. . . . the solution to the problem of growth is not de-growth, but the deconstruction of the economy and the transition towards new rationality that can guide the construction of sustainable worlds. (Leff, 2021, p. 213)

To that end, I suggest, we need to develop strategies of emergent listening, as I developed that concept and practice in my books *Listening to Children* (2014) and *Entanglement in the World’s Becoming and the Doing of New Materialist Inquiry* (2021).

Emergent listening is open to what we do not know; our borders are open. In some senses, emergent listening works against the self of the listener and the desire for, and comfort from, already-given concepts and practices. Through emergent listening, we embrace the task of opening ourselves to the entangled, vital materialities of ourselves and of others and to an awareness of our capacity to affect each other: ‘Our capacity to affect each other, to enter into composition with others both enhances our specificity and expands our capacity for thought and action’ (Davies, 2014, p. 20). In developing the skill of emergent listening, we might draw on poetry, art and literature, to open up our capacities to know and to be differently — to open up our capacity for sympathy and response-ability (Davies & Speedy, 2024).

The nonhuman world has different modes of communication. Sheldrake writes, for example, about the powers of communication of fungi in his book *Entangled Life. How Fungi make our Worlds, Change our Minds and Shape our Futures* (2020). When asked at a talk he gave in London's Soho, what it is like to be a fungus, Sheldrake answered:

If you had no head, no heart, no centre of operations. If you could taste with your whole body. If you could take a fragment of your toe or your hair and it would grow into a new you — and hundreds of these yous could fuse together into some impossibly large togetherness. And when you wanted to get around, you would produce spores, this little condensed part of you that could travel in the air (Sheldrake in Kahn, 2023, n/p).

Nancy marvels at the way 'the entire world tries to speak itself out . . . to show itself, to open itself, that is, to declare itself for what it is . . . In fact, the entire world has never stopped looking for an expression' (Nancy, 2017, p. 115). We must learn to listen, he says, with all our senses, to that which we do not yet know how to hear:

To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to 'me' (the supposedly given subject), or the 'self' of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to the relationship in self, so to speak, as it forms a 'self' or a 'to itself' in general . . . [where] 'self' is precisely nothing available (substantial or subsistent) to which one can be 'present', but precisely the resonance of a return [*renvoi*] . . . a reality consequently indissociably 'mine' and 'other,' 'singular' and 'plural', as much as it is 'material' and spiritual and 'signifying' and 'a-signifying'. (Nancy, 2007, p. 12)

To listen in this way, to be open to the chaos of events, is a painful, and sometimes rapturous, necessity of coming to something new. We must place ourselves on the plane of composition, which:

cuts across and thus plunges into, filters and coheres chaos through the coming into being of sensation [and] is thus both an immersion in chaos but also a mode of disruption and ordering of chaos through the extraction of that which life can glean for itself and its own intensification from this whirling complexity — sensations, affects, percepts, intensities — blocs of bodily becoming that always co-evolve with blocs of becoming of matter or events. (Grosz, 2008, p. 9)

This quality of attention to an encounter with the other is not rooted in moral judgements of self and other — self, separate from the other. It begins with the proposition that we are all *of* the world, and thus of the same matter, and at the same time multiple and endlessly divergent.

Life, in this understanding of it is motion, and its capacity to endure depends on the emergence of the new. Emergent listening mobilises all our senses and immerses us in emergent multiplicities. It takes both stillness and perseverance. Stillness 'allows other "planes" of reality to be perceivable' (O'Sullivan, 2001, p. 127). We open up the possibility of 'an engagement with that which goes beyond premature observations and preconceived neutralizing facts' (Manning, 2015, p. 63). Perseverance involves us in multiple provocations to thought, in a dogged hanging out with what we do not yet know how to think.

Research, Manning observes, is

a rigorous process that consists in pushing technique to its limits, revealing its technicity — the very outdoing of technique that makes the more-than of experience felt. Bergson calls it a long encounter, a mode of work, that has nothing to do with synthesis or recognition. . . .

[It is artful creating of] an opening to the unsayable, the unthinkable. And sympathy for the force of this unthinkability. (Manning, 2015, p. 64)

Such an approach resists codifying experiences, one's own and the others', and it resists sorting experiences into existing categories of meaning. It draws on imagination to go beyond the limits of the already-known: 'it is up to the imagination to reflect passion, to make it resonate and go beyond the limits of its natural partiality and presentness' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 48). It involves encounters with the other, both human and more-than-human, and asks of them '*how is this possible . . . Which manner of Being does this imply*' (Deleuze, 1980, n/p).

Conclusion

This paper began as an invitation to you, to us, together, to intra-act, to affect each other, to breathe life into new possibilities for each other, and for the planet — to de-colonise ourselves and to grow new skins. I have searched for new ways of being responsible/response-able in the face of global warming. I have offered a challenge to those of us who have been so colonised by neoliberalism that we cannot think outside it. I have challenged us all to open ourselves to the danger we face globally if we do not learn to think and act differently.

The version of ethics that I have explored here is different from that which neoliberalism has trained us in. It focusses on our encounters with human and more-than-human others and on the intimate entwining of ontology and epistemology. Within that framing of ethics, focussing on matter and mattering, I have explored the evolving symbiotic entanglement of humans with each other and with non-human beings. It explores the possibilities of emergent listening, through which the new might emerge, overcoming the limiting force of neoliberalism, and its fantasy of endless, unlimited growth.

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Ethical standard. Nothing to note.

Notes

1 Entropy refers to the degree of disorder or uncertainty in any system: the law of entropy or second law of thermodynamics refers to the degradation of the matter and energy of the universe and the general trend of the universe towards death and disorder.

2 Robo-debt was a scheme that used automated assessments, based on a system of payment averaging, and backed by venal debt-collectors, sought to extract billions from the poorest members of society, charging them with debt notices for money they did not in fact owe.

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