

IF YOU GO DOWN TO THE WOODS TODAY...**CHRIS SEELEY**

In their turn, each tribe of exiled bears headed north, toward the colder counties. Hiked up into the hills and peaks, then went to ground. Made their way down, down into the darkness and settled, in England's forgotten caves and caverns. Growing still, until sleep came lapping at their ankles. Then deeper sleep came rolling in.

Mick Jackson (2009: 105)

For as long as I remember, I have experienced a sense of archetypal connection with bears. These creatures, long extinct in my home island of Britain, somehow continue to inform and shape our consciousness. I wonder where it comes from, this enduring sense of affiliation with some very different other?

Having (finally) grown out of childhood teddy bears (which is such a widely engaging manifestation of the bear archetype), having read no end of bear-related literature and having failed to see any in the wild on various trips to Canada, I still wanted to get to know these creatures in the same way as I knew my dog. I wanted to experience for myself essential gesture of "bear". To know them in the sense of acquaintance (*connaître* in French or *kennen* in German) – or *witness* knowing (Shotter, 2005) rather than knowing *about* them (*savoir* in French or *wissen* in German). We have lost this distinction in the English language and maybe partly as a consequence, quality in research tends to be implicitly associated with saviour, *wissen* and aboutness knowing. Research that is focused on becoming acquainted with a phenomenon (*connaître*, *kennen* or *witness* knowing) is considered by some to be academically second rate. And yet it is this more hidden knowing which enables us to navigate our practical lived relationships with each other and other species.

In North America, where bears still live, they are often portrayed as fierce, growling, aggressive and scary. People are taught from an early age to be frightened of bears of all kinds – including the black bear, which apparently evolved more as a prey animal than a predator, meaning that it is inclined to be ready to run away (or up a tree) as a first defence and very unlikely to respond aggressively through attack.

"Black bears are so timid today partly because they evolved alongside such powerful predators as sabre-toothed cats, American lions, dire wolves and short-faced bears, all of which became extinct only about 12,000 years ago. Black bears were the only one of these that could climb trees, so black bears survived by staying near trees and developing the attitude: run first and ask questions later. The timid ones passed on their genes to create the black bear of today." (www.bear.org)



When at the end of 2009, I stumbled upon a BBC documentary (BBC) about research -conducted by Dr Lyn Rogers and his assistant Sue Mansfield at the Wildlife Research Centre, Eagle's Nest, Minnesota - that sought to know black bears (in the *witness* sense) and their sometimes fraught relationship with humans. I immediately signed up to go and be part of their research and study programme. Research at the Centre, which is gentle, rigorous and qualitative, tracks the personalities, interactions and patterns of individual wild bears over their lifetime and "focuses on improving coexistence between people and bears in an increasingly urbanized environment" (www.bearstudy.org)

This ethological approach demands that a degree of trust and tolerance is built between researchers and bears. It looks close up at behaviours and relationships but continues to be questioned as unconventional by

old paradigm thinking - something also experienced by well-known primatologists Diane Fossey and Jane Goodall.

“One of the things to emerge from long-term, close-up studies like this... is the difference of individual personalities. That’s why we use the word “who” instead of “it” or “that” when talking about individual bears. They have lives. They don’t behave mechanically. They show us that the natural world is complicated, wonderful, and endlessly new. That’s what has kept us intrigued for so many decades and what continues to show us how little we know about what is going on in their minds and hearts.” (www.bearstudy.org)

In this writing, I am focusing in less on *what* I learned about these creatures and the human politics surrounding the whole situation and more about *how* the context and process I exposed myself to created the conditions for a receptive and holistic mode of knowing.

First, the primary encounters with the bears. This was initially informed through lectures and information gained from experience about how to comport oneself in the company of wild black bears. When I (and seven others) arrived at the research station, I listened intently, effectively apprenticing myself to the researchers’ long experience of living alongside these animals. It felt viscerally real; already we could hear bears moving around on the wooden veranda surrounding the research station and soon we would be out in the woods with them.

At this stage, I had a sense of archetypal connection to the *idea* of bear, a tiny amount of received knowledge *about* bear-human interaction in this context, the *social conditioning* of bears being portrayed in popular culture as dangerous and fierce, and a handful of memories of seeing *captive* bears in zoo-type situations. In short, I still had no *lived experience* whatsoever of the actual phenomenon of bear-ness, where bear is part of forest and forest part of bear.

Standing, moments later, between a wild mother bear and her cubs, my intellectual *aboutness* knowing (“don’t get between a mother and her cubs!”) and my rapidly unfolding experiential *witness* knowing (“this is OK, I feel safe as long as I do nothing to lead this bear into feeling unsafe”) competed with one another. I needed to trust my own senses and bodily responses rather than what the scaremongering popular imagery would have us believe about how bears are likely to behave. I was here at my own risk, with nothing to protect me from these strong creatures but my own quality of presence and common sense. That the bears should show any trust towards humans, given that most of them will go on to be killed by humans and all will have their habitat taken by human activity, amazed and moved me.

Later, we humans lay round a white pine tree where the same mother slept with her three cubs at the base of its trunk. They were utterly wild (albeit habituated to our presence) yet they chose to trust us.

Overcoming the idea of bear with the actuality of experience demanded that I simultaneously pay attention to the context around me and to the data coming from within me. Like the bears around me, my senses were alert and I was instinctively opening myself to discerning patterns of behaviour and seeking anomalies in those patterns. I paid attention to my own breathing and heart rate. What was the mother bear doing? Did she seem relaxed? Where was her gaze? In response to what sounds did her sensitive ears twitch? When she raised her head to sniff the air, what could this tell me with my much duller sense of smell?

It was instantly clear to me that this was not an encounter, with bear as “object” and me as “observer”, so much as *placing myself as part of the context of bear/forest*. I held both a *focused consciousness* on the bear before me and a *diffuse attention* (de Castillejo, 1973) to whole context of trees-forest-cubs-food-other bears-gusts of wind-human presence. Like the bears, my presence influenced and shaped the nature of this context. That I was there at all, and how I was present played a part in creating the conditions which in turn affected me-bear-others.

I was surprised at how moved I was each time a bear took form in the dense wood. I understood *respect* at a visceral, not intellectual, level, looking again and again at what the bears were doing, at what they, in turn, were watching, and seeing them with a kind of differential regard – they were in charge here, I was just a passing visitor.



As the field study course continued I asked myself how I might dwell more fully in any given moment. Time neither rushed by nor did it stand still. Rather it seemed to become irrelevant as I gave exquisite attention to the experience itself and to my practice of drawing the bears. The practice of drawing helped me stay with and deepen my aesthetic experience as I became more intimately acquainted with the patterns of movements and interactions of these creatures in their habitat. It supported me in my *seeing* rather than just *looking* (Franck, 1973) through the lens of the camera. I did take photographs as well as make

drawings. These two activities felt very different – photography had an aura of taking, grabbing, capturing whilst drawing felt like offering, making, responding. With drawing I felt more present, with photography, less so. Compare the quantity of future-oriented quick and seductive photography (in the hope that the next shot will be a good one) with the present, patient quality of careful tracery of a bear's essential shape through eye, hand and pencil.

Artist Leigh Hyams makes a similar point when she says: *"If you genuinely, deeply look at a real flower the reality of it is a non-language reality. It is simply, uniquely what it is, and can't be described in any language. When a botanist tells us the species it belongs to that's not the flower, it's only information. The large flower images in my paintings are not flowers. They are paintings. They exist as works of art but they are also a vehicle that can point beyond art work. It's true that some of the shapes can be named—that's the stem, there's the stamen—but if you are open and keep looking at the images themselves, words stop having any meaning"* (artsreal.com)

I have embodied this experience with the bears differently, more fully, than if I had just read about it, if I had just seen it on film, or if I had just photographed it. I remember the points of drawing particularly clearly. The attention I brought through drawing and through the qualities of my awareness deepened my aesthetic experience. Coming back home, I wanted to continue to dwell in this experience, to be consciously informed by it and, perhaps, take this hidden knowledge and make it visible to others.

The emotional impact of my encounter with the bears raised profound questions: How do these the expanded ways of knowing in the moment, tip into an expanded way of being in the world, beyond the sheer privilege of the encounters themselves? What is my responsibility to others, to the bears and the ecosystem of which they are an emergent part, to myself? Am I willing to reveal and articulate my living subjectivity? How do I keep dwelling in the experience and not skim over it? How do I follow my train of my thought and weave it back in and out of my bodily experience? How do I re-member the bears through my own bodily experience?

I ask myself: Am I willing to be vulnerable enough to apprentice myself to these fuller ways of knowing? Am I willing to immerse myself more fully into the imaginative realm, to "do the work" that takes me beyond thinking about, and into getting to know this aesthetic, patterning mode more deeply? Am I willing to behave in artful ways that "sensuously frame" life (Arteaga, 2011) and are consciously "making special" (Dissanayake, 1988: 126)?

Seven months after my return, I was a little closer to making the experience visible to others. The experience was ripening, and I was starting to respond to my experience. I felt my own resistance to shifting from knowing about, to living a more exposed, vulnerable and revealing life, I committed to a one woman performance which would plait facts, memories and myths in and out of each other. The performance event wove together many different ways of knowing, bringing my experience to an audience of neighbours and friends and doing justice to the bears' continued existence in North America. I also told a story about how we in the UK obliterated our bear population centuries ago (see Jackson, 2009). Now, another 8 months later, I am working on a painted triptych (and this writing) as further responses.



I haven't even begun to explore the possibilities of an even more embodied knowing through mime and movement, to *"develop a habit of engaging physically with the world, while heightening a sensitivity to the often ineffable way that the world continuously engages with us..."* (McNeer, 2010). Bear biologist Dr Lynn Rogers makes a lot of bear-like noises and movements after his 44-year research, empathizing with these other sentient beings in a kind of physical prayer of deep physical engagement and embodiment.

Disciplines, practices and approaches such as Action Inquiry (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) and Goethean Science (Kaplan, 2002) demand of us that we value and develop the many ways we come to know, beyond grazing the intellectual or delving into the abstract. They ask that we extend our epistemology by paying rigorous aesthetic and embodied attention to the ways we receive and respond to our experience of the world through movement, stories, image making, musicality, practice, play and performance... as well as through our ideas and theories (Heron, 1992). This expansion means developing everyday aesthetic practices for ourselves and others: "aesthetic experience emerges due to a certain mode of activity... in the aesthetic experience, we have conscious access to knowledge through our body as a whole... and the sense of the system of interactions as a whole" (Arteaga, 2011).

Implicitly making the link between cultivating these fuller ways to knowing and creating a more sustainable future, they seek to heal the Cartesian mind/body split through an "epistemotherapy" (Rosen, 1994) and a greater "epistemological equity" (Cole, 2004). Cultivating greater equity between our different ways of knowing requires a systematic awareness of what gets valued. I want to stress that this does not mean devaluing intellectual endeavour, but bringing alongside it the individual and collective practices of paying rigorous attention to the imagination, to intuitive knowing, emotional data, aesthetic and embodied knowing. Commenting on the work of Gregory Bateson, Noel Charlton says:

"If aesthetic engagement offers us a remedy for our sealed-off, self-seeking purposiveness, it will do so by reconnecting, integrating, enabling wholeness and the recognition of oneness. Further, we must be involved in active process with the art and with the natural beauty..." (Charlton, 2008:141)

"Engagement in aesthetic process, as creative artist or 'appreciator' of art (and 'art' means poetry, music, drama, dance and 'natural history' as well as painting and sculpture) enables us to recover our lost sense of unity with the living world, our integration with the rest of life on the planet." (Charlton, 2004).

If both we and the other-than-human world are to flourish then we must exercise our responsibility to become more wholly human; not merely acknowledging that we come to know in diverse ways, but actually to *live* and *be* in ways which invite the artful *and* the intellectual, the embodied *and* the theoretical, the hearty *and* the heady with equal thoroughness and enthusiasm. We need to dissolve the boundaries that split these artificial categories and develop a comprehensivist, transdisciplinary (Nicolescu, 2008) rigour if we are to enhance the qualities of life around and within us and achieve a broader sense of "success".

Yet, in a world which tends to devalue artful practice as being somehow frivolous whilst simultaneously reifying it through the "Art World" of galleries, concert halls and auctions, it is hard to carve out space for ordinary, everyday knowing through attending to our moving, drawing, stories or poetry – both in our own lives and through the strictures of organisational norms. Somehow we deny ourselves the most delightful and nourishing fruits of the self-reflective and imaginal consciousness which we humans uniquely offer.

Further, how do we make the deeper shift from intellectually recognising broader, more whole ways to know, towards cultivating and living our lives in ways which incorporate our extraordinary birthright and evolutionary gift of receiving and responding to the world art/fully?

Underneath our epistemological impoverishment, I am coming to think that at the deepest level we know all this anyway. We know this in all the ways we have to know. Beneath the chatter and the noise, the statistics and the facts, the messages and the tweets and the updates and the breaking news, the creatures of the information within us and outside of us understand, inform and influence us. Like creatures in a forest, sometimes they can only be glimpsed through the trees or with a sideways glance. Our point of contact with this creaturely knowing comes through an invitation we must freely issue over and over again. Our responsibility is to make space for this embodied, vital conversation and give it our attention in all the ways we can.

"I know artists whose medium is Life itself, and who express the inexpressible without brush, pencil, chisel or guitar. They neither paint nor dance. Their medium is Being. Whatever their hand touches has increased Life. They SEE and don't have to draw. They are the artists of being alive." (Frederick Franck, 1973: 129)

References

- Arteaga A, 2011, Personal Communication, 04/03/11, Social Sculpture Research Unit, Oxford Brookes University
- de Castillejo I, 1973, *Knowing Woman: A Feminine Psychology*. CG Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, Hodder & Stoughton
- Charlton N, 2008, *Understanding Gregory Bateson: Mind, Beauty and the Sacred Earth*, State University of New York Press
- Charlton N, 2004, *Common Ground: the Living Earth as Sacred*, Initiative: Building Global Interfaith Co-operation, 12, Spring, 2004, pp. 6-7
- Cole A, L Neilsen, et al, Eds. 2004, *Provoked by Art: Theorizing Arts-informed Research*, Backalong Books & Centre for Arts Informed Research
- Dissanayake E, 1988, *What is Art For?*, University of Washington Press
- Franck F, 1973, *The Zen of Seeing: Seeing/Drawing as Meditation*, Random House USA
- Heron J, 1992, *Feeling and Personhood: Psychology in Another Key*, Sage
- Hyams L, 2012, *Attitudes*, <http://www.artsreal.com/writing.html#attitudes>, accessed 15 February
- Jackson M, 2009, *Bears by Night*, in *Bears of England*, Faber & Faber
- Kaplan A, 2002, *Development Practitioners and Social Process: Artists of the Invisible*, Pluto Press
- McNeer R, 2010, *Mime as Metaphor*, unpublished paper, La Luna nel Pozzo, Italy
- Nicolescu B (ed), 2008, *Transdisciplinarity - Theory and Practice*, Hampton Press, Cresskill, NJ, US
- Reason P & Bradbury H (eds), 2001, *The Handbook of Action Research*, Sage
- Rosen SM, 1994, *Science, Paradox, and the Moebius Principle*, Albany, NY, State University of New York Press
- Seeley C, 2011, *Uncharted territory: Imagining a stronger relationship between the arts and action research*, *Action Research Journal*, March 2011, Sage
- Rogers, L & S Mansfield, 2011, *Misconceptions about black bears: a response to Geist (2011)*. *Human-Wildlife Interactions*. 5(2): 173–176
- Shotter J, (2005), *Goethe and the Refiguring of Intellectual Inquiry: From 'Aboutness'-Thinking to 'Witness'-Thinking in Everyday Life*, *Janus Head* Volume: 8, Issue: 1, Pages: 132-158
- BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00np2gk>
- <http://www.bearstudy.org/website/about-wri/about-the-wri.html>,
- Wildlife Research Institute (2012), <http://www.bear.org/website/bear-pages/black-bear/bears-a-humans/119-how-dangerous-are-black-bears.html>



Chris Seeley co-directs the *Ashridge Masters in Sustainability and Responsibility (AMSR)*. She uses the visual arts, storytelling, clowning, improvisation, creative writing and forum theatre in her education for sustainability, business and international development work practices. She is also a Research Associate at the Social Sculpture Research Unit at Oxford Brookes University and works with doctoral candidates at the California Institute of Integral Studies and Ashridge Business School.

chris@wildmargins.com