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*A Network*  
OF BODIES



THE WITSPROUTS PROJECT



## **A Network of Bodies: Ancient Thoughts On Our Interconnected Lives**

A Network of Bodies is a 3-part series exploring ancient thoughts about the connectedness of everything in existence. From Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh's insight about the relationship between the rotting garbage and the sprouting rose, to quote snippets from contemporary thinkers on the relevance of joint action for collective development. This is an exploratory study on the concept of interbeing.

— Tope Akintayo Curator

## **I. The Rose is the Future of the Garbage**

Several thinkers and writers have, either directly or indirectly, established the concept of Universal Interbeing—the position that we are all interconnected whether we are aware of it or not and that the existence of one ultimately affects the existence of the other.

American Baptist minister and human rights activist Martin Luther Jr. (1929 – 1968), in an address, delivered days before his assassination to the congregation of National Cathedral Washington, invited us to remember that our world is a neighbourhood. He posited that:

...whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.

In *Oath of Fealty*, a sci-fi masterpiece written by American science fiction and fantasy writer Elizabeth Moon and which is “widely judged to be one of the great post-Tolkien fantasies” according to Goodreads, used an illustration of a tree to make a point in support of the concept:

A tree is alive, and thus it is always more than you can see. Roots to leaves, yes—those you can, in part, see. But it is more—it is the lichens and moss and ferns that grow on its bark, the life too small to see that lives among its roots, a community we know of, but do not think on. It is every fly and bee and beetle that uses it for shelter or food, every bird that nests in its branches. Every one an individual, and yet every one part of the tree, and the tree part of everyone.

Two decades before Moon penned this concise revelation, Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh published *Peace is Every Step*, the volume that seeks to draw a path of mindfulness in everyday life. Thich Nhat Hanh presented expressly in 1990 the same position of interbeing that Moon echoed in 2010. Starting with the relationship between the allegedly pure rose and the allegedly dirty garbage:

Defiled or immaculate. Dirty or pure. These are concepts we form in our minds. A beautiful rose we have just cut and placed in our vase is pure. It smells so good, so fresh. A garbage can is an opposite. It smells horrible, and it is filled with rotten things. But that is only when we look on the surface. If we look more deeply we will see that in just five or six days, the rose will

become part of the garbage. We do not need to wait five days to see it. If we just look at the rose, and we look deeply, we can see it now. And if we look into the garbage can, we see that in a few months its contents can be transformed into lovely vegetables, and even a rose. If you are a good organic gardener, looking at a rose you can see the garbage, and looking at the garbage you can see a rose. Roses and garbage inter-are. Without a rose, we cannot have garbage; and without garbage, we cannot have a rose. They need each other very much. The rose and the garbage are equal. The garbage is just as precious as the rose.

Then Hanh moved on to the relationship between living things and the sun, which he described as the universal heart, the enabler of the long chain of the connective survival of all living things, without which all life would be impossible:

We know that if our heart stops beating, the flow of our life will stop, and so we cherish our hearts very much. Yet we do not often take the time to notice that other things, outside of our bodies, are also essential for our survival. Look at the immense light we call the sun. If it were to stop shining, the flow of our life would also stop, so the sun is

our second heart, a heart outside of our body. This immense “heart” gives all life on Earth the warmth necessary for existence. Plants live thanks to the sun. Their leaves absorb the sun’s energy, along with carbon dioxide from the air, to produce food for the tree, the flower, the plankton. And thanks to plants, we and other animals can live. All of us—people, animals, and plants—consume the sun, directly and indirectly. We cannot begin to describe all the effects of the sun, that great heart outside of our body. Our body is not limited to what is inside the boundary of our skin. It is much more immense. It includes even the layer of air around our Earth; for if the atmosphere were to disappear for even an instant, our life would end. There is no phenomenon in the universe that does not intimately concern us, from a pebble resting at the bottom of the ocean to the movement of a galaxy millions of light-years away.

To pre-validate Nhat Hanh’s words, in his 1855 poem entitled *Songs of Myself*, American poet, essayist, and journalist Walt Whitman wrote, “I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars.” A statement that expresses beautifully the position that the stars are in some way the plants’ essence and without them, although this is not obvious, the plants won’t be.

Furthermore, in *How to Love*, a book which the widely knowledgeable Maria Popova of *Brain Pickings* had described as a “slim, simply worded collection of his immeasurably wise insights on the most complex and most rewarding human potentiality”, Nhat Hanh had written against the mentality of independence in the continuous existence of an individual:

We think we have a self. But there is no such thing as an individual separate self. A flower is made only of non-flower elements, such as chlorophyll, sunlight, and water. If we were to remove all the non-flower elements from the flower, there would be no flower left. A flower cannot be by herself alone. A flower can only inter-be with all of us... Humans are like this too. We can't exist by ourselves alone. We can only inter-be. I am made only of non-me elements, such as the Earth, the sun, parents, and ancestors. In a relationship, if you can see the nature of interbeing between you and the other person, you can see that his suffering is your own suffering, and your happiness is his own happiness. With this way of seeing, you speak and act differently. This in itself can relieve so much suffering.

Meanwhile, back in *Peace is Every Step*, Nhat Hanh shifts our focus to the tree. For the tree to be, every part

of it, even the seemingly insignificant bit, must contribute to the being. This is ultimately presented in an alleged dialogue between the Zen Buddhist and a leaf:

One autumn day, I was in a park, absorbed in the contemplation of a very small, beautiful leaf, shaped like a heart. Its colour was almost red, and it was barely hanging on the branch, nearly ready to fall down. I spent a long time with it, and I asked the leaf a number of questions. I found out the leaf had been a mother to the tree. Usually, we think that the tree is the mother and the leaves are just children, but as I looked at the leaf I saw that the leaf is also a mother to the tree. The sap that the roots take up is only water and minerals, not sufficient to nourish the tree. So the tree distributes that sap to the leaves and the leaves transform the rough sap into elaborated sap and, with the help of the sun and gas, send it back to the tree for nourishment. Therefore, the leaves are also the mother to the tree. Since the leaf is linked to the tree by a stem, the communication between them is easy to see.

In the same vein, the focus of the wise man's philosophical lens is directed at human beings. Starting with the illustration of the connection between a mother and the child through the umbilical cord, Hanh

pronounces the earth as the mother of us all connected to us and connecting us through several stems that keeps the chain of existence going:

We do not have a stem linking us to our mother anymore, but when we were in her womb, we had a very long stem, an umbilical cord. The oxygen and the nourishment we needed came to us through that stem. But on the day we were born, it was cut off, and we received the illusion that we became independent. That is not true. We continue to rely on our mother for a very long time, and we have many other mothers as well. The Earth is our mother. We have a great many stems linking us to our Mother Earth. There are stems linking us with the clouds. If there are no clouds, there will be no water for us to drink. We are made of at least seventy percent water, and the stem between the cloud and us is really there. This is also the case with the river, the forest, the logger, and the farmer. There are hundreds of thousands of stems linking us to everything in the cosmos, supporting us and making it possible for us to be.

Finally, in this age of diversity and segregation, the mindfulness master once again relied on the leaf's wisdom to make suggestions on what our behaviour to one another and to the Universe at large should be like:

Do you see the link between you and me? If you are not there, I am not here. This is certain. If you do not see it yet, please look more deeply and I am sure you will. I asked the leaf whether it was frightened because it was autumn and the other leaves were falling. The leaf told me, "No. During the whole spring and summer I was completely alive. I worked hard to help nourish the tree, and now much of me is in the tree. I am not limited by this form. I am also the whole tree, and when I go back to the soil, I will continue to nourish the tree. So I don't worry at all. As I leave this branch and float to the ground, I will wave to the tree and tell her, 'I will see you again very soon.'" That day there was a wind blowing and, after a while, I saw the leaf leave the branch and float down to the soil, dancing joyfully, because as it floated it saw itself already there in the tree. It was so happy. I bowed my head, knowing that I have a lot to learn from that leaf.

## II. Why Independence is a Myth

"We require as many technologies to make a new technology," said Kevin Kelly, the co-founder and founding editor of *WIRED Magazine* in a recent interview with Krista Tippett of *On Being*. "If we hold up your iPhone," he continued "that's a result of thousands of other technologies that are needed to produce that."

Kelly's words at this very recent moment are proportional to the words written by Leonard Read in the 1958 classic *I, Pencil*, an essay "written in the first person from the point of view of a pencil. The pencil details the complexity of its own creation, listing its components (cedar, lacquer, graphite, ferrule, factice, pumice, wax, glue) and the numerous people involved, down to the sweeper in the factory and the lighthouse keeper guiding the shipment into port."

Leonard's aim of writing the essay is to show "that free men and women will respond to the Invisible Hand." That is, no matter how independently we think we are doing our works, we are indirectly and unconsciously working towards a universal course just as seen in the story of the pencil.

In 2010, Matt Ridley took to the TED stage to give a speech with many positions revolving around the central premise that civilization and human advancement are results of ideas having sex. One such position is that there is great benefit in exchange and collective effort

towards human's personal and technological development. He illustrated his position at length:

"Adam takes four hours to make a spear and three hours to make an axe. Oz takes one hour to make a spear and two hours to make an axe. So Oz is better at both spears and axes than Adam. He doesn't need Adam. He can make his own spears and axes. Well no, because if you think about it, if Oz makes two spears and Adam make two axes, and then they trade, then they will each have saved an hour of work. And the more they do this, the more true it's going to be, because the more they do this, the better Adam is going to get at making axes and the better Oz is going to get at making spears. So the gains from trade are only going to grow. And this is one of the beauties of exchange, is it actually creates the momentum for more specialization, which creates the momentum for more exchange and so on. Adam and Oz both saved an hour of time. That is prosperity, the saving of time in satisfying your needs.

Ask yourself how long you would have to work to provide for yourself an hour of reading light this evening to read a book by. If you had to start from scratch, let's say you go out into the countryside. You find a

sheep. You kill it. You get the fat out of it. You render it down. You make a candle, etc. etc. How long is it going to take you? Quite a long time. How long do you actually have to work to earn an hour of reading light if you're on the average wage in Britain today? And the answer is about half a second. Back in 1950, you would have had to work for eight seconds on the average wage to acquire that much light. And that's seven and a half seconds of prosperity that you've gained since 1950, as it were, because that's seven and a half seconds in which you can do something else, or you can acquire another good or service. And back in 1880, it would have been 15 minutes to earn that amount of light on the average wage. Back in 1800, you'd have had to work six hours to earn a candle that could burn for an hour. In other words, the average person on the average wage could not afford a candle in 1800."

In harmony with Kevin Kelly's earlier assertion about every single technology being the result of the continuous exchange between a collection of several others, Matt Ridley adds:

"What happens when you cut people off from exchange, from the ability to exchange and specialise? And the answer is that not

only do you slow down technological progress, you can actually throw it into reverse."

Finally, in the same vein, in *The Myth of Independent Thought* Charles Chu shared a quote from cognitive scientists Sloman and Fernbach's *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone*.

"The human mind is not like a desktop computer, designed to hold reams of information. The mind is a flexible problem solver that evolved to extract only the most useful information to guide decisions in new situations. As a consequence, individuals store very little detailed information about the world in their heads. In that sense, people are like bees and society a beehive: Our intelligence resides not in individual brains but in the collective mind. To function, individuals rely not only on knowledge stored within our skulls but also on knowledge stored elsewhere: in our bodies, in the environment, and especially in other people. When you put it all together, human thought is incredibly impressive. But it is a product of a community, not of any individual alone."

This is the same phenomenon at work in the biggest search engine in the world today. Google is a result of

millions of unaffiliated websites providing content for the Google bot to crawl. So it's not just about an independent Google, it's not even about an independent site somewhere on the web. Everyone must work together for everything to work.

### III. You're Part of An Interconnected Universe

**Master Rosicrucian Lonnie C. Edwards, wrote in [\*Spiritual Laws that Govern the Universe \(2015\)\*](#), about the mystery that governs the universe, towards which we (that is, every imaginable existence) all subconsciously yearn:**

"There is an inherent mystery in life - an inner urge, an attraction to move toward the light. This mysterious component of life is innate in all life forms. It is, one might say, an urge to seek illumination or to manifest the creator's beautiful light. This urge is responsible for the interplay of human relationships and experiences. It is responsible for evolution's forward movement and progress toward the greater light... Observe the plant pushing its way out of the darkness of the soil and into the light of the sun where it can then express its full potential. Observe the infant anxious to express life, moving and extricating itself from the womb of its mother under this mysterious impulse. Observe this innate urge in the human being as he or she continues the search for greater knowledge--greater illumination. Observe the human being moving into experiences and relationships that are destined to bring lessons to learn and thus spiritual growth. Observe the student of mysticism penetrating into the realm of the soul, a place of light and beauty... Masters and philosophers have written on the pages of wisdom concerning the book of man and the book of nature. This mysterious governing intelligence is vibrating and communicating wisdom

throughout all life. Behind the seemingly ordinary, routine aspects of our daily lives that constitutes only the "appearance" of life, there is a mystery and a mystical experience."

We carry profound truth and wisdom within us, we only need to dig in, sincerely, confidently, without shame, without fear and manifest our truth. Here are thoughts from physicist Albert Einstein (1879 – 1955) and writer Henry Miller (1891 – 1980) on the indwelling truth within us all.

**Albert Einstein, from William Hermanns' [\*Einstein and the Poet: In Search of the Cosmic Man \(1983\)\*](#):**

If we want to improve the world, we cannot do it with scientific knowledge but with ideals. Confucius, Buddha, Jesus and Gandhi have done more for humanity than science has done. We must begin with the heart of man—with his conscience—and the values of conscience can only be manifested by selfless service to mankind.

**Henry Miller, from [\*Henry Miller on Writing \(1964\)\*](#):**

Every day we slaughter our finest impulses. That is why we get a heart-ache when we read those lines written by the hand of a master and recognize them as our own, as the tender shoots which we stifled because we lacked the faith to believe in our own powers, our own criterion of truth and beauty. Every man, when he gets quiet, when he becomes desperately honest with himself, is

capable of uttering profound truths. We all derive from the same source. There is no mystery about the origin of things. We are all part of creation, all kings, all poets, all musicians; we have only to open up, to discover what is already there.

**German philosopher and Christian gnostic Jakob Böhme (1575 – 1624) on the all-encompassing Oneness:**

Nothing comes before the Deity—not good or evil. The Divine Itself is the beginning, an eternal nothingness. The Creator is nothing and everything and is one Will in which lies the whole world and all of creation. In the Divine all is eternal and without beginning in equal measurement. The Creator is neither Light nor Darkness, neither Love nor Hate, but the eternal Oneness.

**Benedict J. Williamson, [The Rosicrucian Manuscript \(2002\)](#):**

There are many names for the source of knowledge—the Absolute, the Cosmic, God, the Divine Spirit, the Transcendent—yet the concept is one; it is the Universal Manifestation, the Spiritual Essence, that pervades all things. And, it is this entity, this Universal Oneness, that the mystic seeks to know.

**The Three Initiates, [Kybalion: A Study of the Hermetic Philosophy of Ancient Egypt \(2017\)](#):**

Do not make the mistake of supposing that the little world you see around you - the Earth, which is a mere grain of dust in the Universe - is the Universe itself. There are millions upon millions of such worlds, and greater. And there are millions of millions of such Universes in existence within the Infinite Mind of the All.