

I had a dream

The Elixir of Life

I dreamt I understood why we are here: to learn how to get along with others unlike us, not only humans, but all beings. A lamb, an insect, a tree, anything and everything. In that moment I realised they are representatives of their worlds. Before I could finish sharing it, I seemed to ascend beyond that level of existence. I woke with the feeling that life's true elixir may be relationship: learning to live in reciprocity with one another and with the living Earth. If we remember this in time, perhaps we can still change.

A short story born from a dream

I HAD A DREAM

The Elixir of Life

"They are representatives of their worlds."

The Night Outside

The fire had gone mostly to coals by the time the night became properly dark. Away from the city, darkness does not feel empty. It has depth. The trees stand inside it rather than against it. The ground cools. The sky enlarges. Every small sound becomes its own event: a branch settling, a wing beating somewhere beyond the light, the minute industry of insects continuing whether or not anyone is there to notice.

I had gone camping to get away from the usual noise, but the quiet did not empty my mind. It seemed to give it more room. When I finally slept, the dream did not arrive as a story I was watching. It arrived as a life I was already inside. There was no curtain rising, no announcement that reality had changed. I simply found myself there with the absolute familiarity dreams sometimes possess, as though I had always belonged to that place and had only temporarily forgotten it while awake.

I was with friends. I cannot now recover every detail of where we were, and perhaps that is important. The place was ordinary enough that I did not question it. What mattered was the conversation. I was speaking with the urgency that comes when a thought is no longer merely a thought, when understanding seems to have moved out of the head and into the body. I had worked something out. Not solved existence, not decoded the universe, but found a sentence that seemed to explain why this world was so crowded with difference.

I began to tell them: the reason we are here, with everything that is here, is to learn how to get along with what is not us.

Even inside the dream, I knew immediately that the word "us" was dangerous. It wanted to shrink the idea back down to humans: nations, races, families, religions, neighbours, strangers. All of that was included, certainly, but it was far too small. The thought kept opening. A lamb. An insect. A tree. A bird crossing the sky. A creature beneath the soil. The soil itself as a congregation of living processes. Everything that shared this place without sharing our shape, our language, our speed, our appetites or our idea of importance.

And then the phrase arrived: they are representatives of their worlds.

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Representatives

The phrase did not mean, at least not in the way I understood it afterwards, that every lamb had been sent from a distant planet or every tree was an ambassador from another star. The dream was stranger and more intimate than that. A world could exist right beside another world and still remain almost completely invisible to it.

The lamb represented a world organised through senses and relationships I could only partly imagine: scent, flock, vulnerability, grass, weather, touch, fear, recognition. To me it might appear as livestock, dinner, softness, innocence, nuisance, commerce or companionship. But none of those descriptions exhausted what it was to be the lamb. They were descriptions from my side of the meeting.

An insect seemed smaller still, so small that a human hand could end its life almost accidentally. Yet scale was suddenly stripped of authority. Tiny did not mean trivial. The insect inhabited distances, dangers, signals, temperatures, textures and urgencies configured differently from mine. A garden that I crossed in six steps could be

a continent of shelter, hunting ground, catastrophe and possibility. Its world was not a miniature version of mine. It was its own arrangement of relevance.

Then the tree. I had spent my whole life walking past trees while believing I had seen them. In the dream, the tree seemed almost offensively patient. It occupied time differently. Its body was both record and infrastructure: roots trading with fungi, leaves negotiating light, branches becoming habitat, bark holding injuries from seasons already forgotten by the people passing beneath it. A human might sit under it for an hour and call the hour long. The tree had another measure.

The more the thought opened, the less sensible the old hierarchy became. Not because all beings were identical. They were not. That was precisely the point. Difference did not need to be erased before relationship became possible. The challenge was not to make the lamb human, the insect lovable, the tree useful, or the river profitable. The challenge was to meet what was different without immediately demanding that it justify itself in our language.

Each thing carried a world. Each encounter was therefore larger than it looked.

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The Unfinished Sentence

I tried to tell my friends all of this at once. Dreams allow impossible compression: an entire philosophy can arrive in the time it takes to breathe in. I remember the certainty more clearly than the words. I remember thinking that of course this was it. Of course I was going to work it out. A sensation like *deja vu* moved through me, not merely the feeling that this had happened before, but that I had been approaching this moment for a very long time.

I was midway through the explanation when something changed.

There is no waking comparison that quite fits what happened next. The nearest image is an old video game: defeat the final enemy, complete the level, and suddenly the ordinary rules release you. But there was no enemy in the dream. Nothing had been conquered. The strange thing was that the change came precisely when the idea of conquest had fallen away.

My body and mind seemed to begin leaving the level on which my friends were standing. I did not decide to rise. I was not climbing a staircase or flying. Reality itself appeared to loosen its grip around me. Sensations passed through me that I have no waking vocabulary for. I was still myself, yet the boundaries by which I recognised myself were becoming uncertain. There was awe in it, and shock, and an almost physical recognition that the sentence I was trying to finish belonged to the place I was leaving.

My friends were still there. The message was still unfinished.

And then I woke.

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The World After the Dream

Morning did what morning always does. There was air, ground, fabric, light. The practical world reassembled itself with almost comic confidence. But the dream had left something behind. I could not put perception back exactly where it had been.

Nothing had changed, and everything had acquired an extra dimension. A bird was still a bird, but also the centre of a world I could enter only from the outside. A tree was still a tree, but the word now felt like a label placed on something far larger than the label. Even an insect moving across a surface no longer appeared merely as background motion. It was going somewhere for reasons that belonged to a life.

Then came the awkward part. I remained human.

I still became hungry. I still lived inside a civilisation arranged around convenience, appetite, money, habits, roads, shops, property, extraction and innumerable acts whose consequences are deliberately kept distant from the person performing them. I went home and had a scotch fillet for dinner.

The dream did not stop me. No thunder sounded. No moral authority struck the plate from my hands. Yet the steak was not exactly the steak it had been before. Beside the category “food” stood another category: animal. Beside animal: life. Beside life: world.

That contradiction may be more useful than a sudden performance of purity. If the dream had merely issued commandments, I might have obeyed them for a week and then resented them. Instead it altered the question. What are we participating in when we eat, build, buy, clear, burn, breed, discard, travel, manufacture and desire? Not: how do we become innocent? There may be no such position for a living creature. Life consumes. Life changes environments. Life depends upon life. The harder question is whether power can remain in relationship with what it changes.

Human beings have become very powerful. That fact is neither praise nor accusation. It is simply the condition from which our ethics now have to begin.

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The Host

In the days after the dream another image kept presenting itself: Earth as host.

Not a host in the sentimental sense, smiling while humanity rearranges the furniture. Not necessarily a conscious planetary personality deciding who may stay and who must leave. The reality is, in one way, more severe. A living system does not need anger in order to become inhospitable to a creature that overwhelms the conditions supporting it.

A forest can lose enough of itself that rain patterns change. Soil can be stripped faster than it rebuilds. Water can carry what we discharge into it. Species can disappear from networks whose full design we never understood. Atmosphere can retain the consequences of combustion long after the moment of convenience has passed. None of this requires the planet to punish us. Feedback is sufficient.

The dream's message therefore did not feel like “save the Earth” in the usual heroic formulation. Earth has endured transformations beyond anything our civilisation could survive. The vulnerable thing is the extraordinary arrangement in which we happen to fit: climates, waters, organisms, pollinators, microbes, soils, seasons, coastlines and relationships that make this particular human flourishing possible.

We are not standing outside that arrangement managing it. We are inside it.

That is where the notion of representatives became difficult and beautiful. If every being is, metaphorically, an embassy from a world, then perhaps maturity begins when we stop treating the meeting as an audition for usefulness. The insect does not have to prove its worth before we decide not to annihilate its habitat. The tree does not need to calculate the price of its shade. A future person does not need to stand in the room before their interests become real.

Relationship begins where domination stops being the only grammar we know.

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The Elixir

For thousands of years we have told stories about the elixir of life. Somewhere there is a substance, a spring, a fruit, a secret formula, a stone, a sacred technology: something that defeats death or restores youth. The longing is understandable. To love life is to become vulnerable to losing it.

But what if the elixir was never a liquid? What if the dream was offering a different interpretation entirely?

Perhaps the elixir of life is the set of relationships that allows life to continue.

A forest drinks because roots, fungi, rain, decay, insects, animals, sunlight and time participate in one another. A body persists because cells cooperate at scales of staggering complexity. A civilisation persists because strangers trust systems they did not personally build. A child survives because someone responds. A species survives because the world remains sufficiently compatible with its needs.

Seen this way, life is not a possession sealed inside an individual. It is an ongoing achievement of relationship.

The deepest mistake of extreme human exceptionalism may therefore be practical rather than philosophical. If we imagine ourselves separate from the worlds around us, we begin dismantling the relationships that permit our own world to exist. We poison the water and later discover that we are made of water. We simplify ecosystems and later discover that our food required complexity. We exhaust soil and later discover that economics cannot negotiate with biology forever. We isolate ourselves socially and later rediscover, painfully, that a human nervous system was never designed to become an island.

The elixir is not everlasting individual life. It is participation in the conditions through which life keeps becoming possible.

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A Different Kind of Intelligence

The dream also changed what intelligence seemed to mean.

We usually admire intelligence when it solves, predicts, controls, optimises or wins. Those capacities matter. They built medicine, engineering, agriculture, communications, shelter and machines capable of extending human perception beyond anything our ancestors could have imagined. But intelligence that only increases capability eventually encounters a problem it cannot solve by becoming more capable.

It must decide what not to do.

A creature clever enough to alter a planet requires another form of intelligence: the ability to recognise relationships it does not fully understand, consequences it cannot completely reverse, and worlds whose value does not originate in their usefulness to itself.

This is not an argument for paralysis. Nor is it an argument that nature is gentle. Nature contains predation, disease, competition, extinction and astonishing indifference to individual suffering. The lesson is not that humanity should become “natural”, because humanity already is. The question is whether reflective consciousness can add something to the ancient machinery of appetite and competition.

Can we become powerful without making power the measure of worth? Can we build without believing every unbuilt place is wasted? Can we eat while remembering that eating has a history? Can we invent technologies that enlarge possibility without making everything else subordinate to them? Can we meet another mind, culture, species or intelligence without first asking how closely it resembles us?

Perhaps that is the exam hidden inside the dream, if there was an exam at all. Not whether we can become masters of the world, but whether mastery is the stage we eventually learn to outgrow.

The Representatives of Their Worlds

I keep returning to the phrase because it refuses to settle.

Representatives of their worlds.

A person sitting opposite me represents a world formed from memories I did not live, losses I did not suffer, loves I do not fully know, senses I cannot borrow, and thoughts that can never be transferred intact into my head. Even someone I have known for decades remains, in this sense, partly extraterrestrial to me. Familiarity does not abolish otherness.

The same is true in more radical form across species. A dog brings a world saturated with scent. A bird brings a geometry of air. A whale carries sound through distances that reorganise our ordinary idea of conversation. An octopus distributes intelligence through a body unlike ours. A tree enters partnerships below ground that remained largely invisible to generations who believed the important part of the tree was what could be cut above ground.

And perhaps “world” can extend further still. A river represents gravity, geology, rainfall, catchment, migration, settlement and everything upstream that arrives downstream later. A patch of soil represents centuries of decomposition and construction compressed beneath a footstep. Even a city is a world: concrete, memory, ambition, waste, loneliness, exchange, opportunity, energy and countless organisms adapting to the strange habitat people have made.

To call these things representatives is not to romanticise them. It is to place a small restraint on certainty. I meet something, but I do not meet all of it. I name something, but the name does not contain it. I use something, but usefulness is not the whole of its existence.

That restraint may be one of the beginnings of respect.

Just in Time

There is fear in the dream's aftermath. It would be dishonest to leave it out.

We live at a moment when human capability is expanding at extraordinary speed while many ecological systems are under extraordinary pressure. It is tempting to turn that fact into either apocalypse or reassurance: everything is doomed, or technology will fix everything. Both positions can become excuses not to participate.

The dream offered neither certainty.

Instead it left me with the peculiar hope that perhaps we had to come dangerously close to losing what mattered before we could perceive it properly. I do not know whether that is true. History provides no guarantee that a civilisation recognises a boundary before crossing it. But neither does history prove that recognition cannot arrive.

Maybe “just in time” is not a date on a calendar. Maybe it is a behaviour. A species is in time whenever it can still notice consequence and change direction.

That possibility exists unevenly and imperfectly all around us: rivers restored, species protected, damaged landscapes regenerated, technologies redesigned, communities reorganised, habits reconsidered, old assumptions becoming embarrassing to the generations that inherit them. None of these acts proves that everything will be fine. They prove something smaller and more useful: trajectories are not always destiny.

The future is not rescued by optimism. It is altered by relationship expressed as action.

The Sentence I Didn't Finish

Sometimes I wonder what I was about to say to my friends before I began to leave the dream.

Perhaps nothing was missing. Perhaps the unfinished sentence was the point.

If I had completed it neatly, I might have woken with a doctrine. Ten rules. A philosophy. A declaration about what reality really is. Instead I woke with a question large enough to remain alive.

How do we get along with what is not us?

Not merely tolerate. Not merely preserve from a safe distance. Not convert everything into ourselves. Get along: the ordinary phrase almost makes me laugh because of the scale of what it contains.

How does a human civilisation get along with forests, oceans, animals, future people, machines, cultures, bacteria, weather systems and forms of intelligence it may not yet understand? How do seven, eight, nine or ten billion private worlds share one physical world without insisting that only one of them counts? How do we remain distinct without turning difference into permission to dominate?

I do not have the completed message.

Maybe no one does.

But I think I understand one part of it now. The world is not scenery arranged around the human story. It is stories meeting stories, systems nested inside systems, lives depending upon lives. We are participants among participants. Powerful ones, certainly. Astonishing ones, perhaps. But representatives nevertheless.

And if there is an elixir of life hidden here, it may be this: not the secret of living forever, but the practice by which life makes room for life.

The lamb carries its world. The insect carries its world. The tree carries its world. My friends carry theirs. I carry mine.

For one impossible moment in a dream, all those worlds seemed to stand together without becoming the same.

I began to tell them what I had understood.

Then the level opened.

I never finished the sentence.

Perhaps we are finishing it now.

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A dream does not have to be literal to alter the way we look at what is real.