

How to hold oneself—and one another—in the world in crisis?

Dendrites

A winter tree in abscission is what the blood vessels in the brain resemble if you look at a map of blood flow through a cerebral angiogram.

They also look like an aerial view of a river's meandering tributaries flowing out into the ocean, or, like the branches of vast and reaching air passages in the lungs.

These phenomena all look the same because their constellation is made up of dendritic patterns. (Dendrites, from the Greek, means 'tree-like'.)

Relationships also follow a dendritic pattern. Were you to depict the connections between two or more entities (people, groups, institutions, the natural world), it would present a tree-like form. It would reveal a core context from which a relation emerges, as well as the branches that stretch in, out, and in-between the time and space of the relationship like elastic bands.

I am not speaking here about intimate relationships, even if dendritic patterns also apply to those. I am referring more broadly to qualities of relation with an other – interdependence, connection, reciprocity. And I am considering the interactions that constitute a relationship, between genders, races, class groups, religions, world regions, eras, and the human/non-human natural world.

Humans are *interdependent* on each other on a local and global level. They are *connected* to their environment including nature, as well as to infrastructure, technology, politics. In all manner of ways, humans and their environment are *reciprocal*.

Sometimes, components of 'relationship-dendrites' are so densely entangled that they are difficult to unravel. Other times, they are as thin as a spider web ready to bristle at the hint of the smallest pressure. It is like laying a bird's nest on a fragile twig. In these instances, both the densely knotty and the bristling disrupt and mutate the dendritic pattern. It becomes disordered and volatile. It is in crisis.

Crisis

A *crisis* typically evokes catastrophe and doom. But what actually characterises crisis is indeed disorder and volatility.

When a relationship is in crisis, it is precarious and unpredictable. It is distorted and unreliable. At this point, a tremendous effort is needed to support, strengthen, organise and reinvent it.

Crisis is generally associated with alarming situations in critical spheres of high priority. We speak, for example, about financial crises, employment crises, health crises.

The term *crisis* is not associated with *relationships*, because the sphere of relationships in a patriarchal society is deemed too feminine, emotional, and embodied rather than cerebral and urgent. Crisis is, therefore, also not typically connected to how people experience the world through their senses and feelings.

Yet beneath the most pressing social, economic and political crises lie a fundamental problem precisely in how to hold oneself—and one another—in the world. Whether it is an intimate relationship, a political institution or an ecosystem, most crises are the result of failing to conscientiously explore collective coexistence, of stunting the dendritic flow in the interest of power and domination.

We can thus define the crisis of relationships simply: the crisis of relationships is the inability to produce a desired, non-destructive outcome when two or more entities are involved with each other. I use the word *entities* as the interplay that suffers is not only that between different human groups, but also that between humans and the non-human natural world, as well as between humans and their own knowledge systems. The crisis of relationship is characterised by a sense of division that feels simultaneously unsurmountable and utterly destructive. In other words, at a time when the need to build conscious relationships between different entities is more pressing than ever, we are struggling, the crisis runs too deep.

The brain and the senses

By design, the brain has the proclivity to forget about its interdependence, connectedness, reciprocity. The brain's complex and (for its survival) necessary ability to introspect, nonetheless inclines it to self-preoccupation and individualism. The ego resides in the brain and while the ego has its purposes—a strong sense of self aids in creativity, activism, innovation, for example—egocentrism can also be self-defeatingly isolating.

The senses, on the other hand, can never forget about relationships because the senses are per definition in a relationship. To *see*, there must be sights. To *hear*, there must be sounds. To *taste*, flavours must exist, and likewise aromas, in order to *smell*. To *touch*, an atmosphere, a substance, a person or an object must be present. Even if the senses are impeded, for example, by being in a dark, silent, odourless room alone, say, consciousness triggers the relationship to *qualia*. These are the interior and subjective experiences to do with the raw feeling of the senses such as the 'silentness' of silence, or the gloominess of darkness.

The senses shift our attention inward, toward a microcosmic view of relationships. They bring awareness to the centre. They are the source of the dendritic pattern.

On a macrocosmic level, the crisis of relationships manifests as geopolitical tensions, wars, humanitarian disasters, inequalities and misery. The profiting systems that control society pay attention to the macrocosmic and refuse to acknowledge that the periphery is connected to the centre. Dominant structures focus on outcome without a corresponding inward query about how seeing, touching and sensing inhabit the world. Consequently, to use an apt metaphor, we lose sight of possibilities of transforming the crisis of relationship.

Consider, for example, a relatively small inward-facing relationship entity such as a family. A family crisis might erupt following the death of one of its members. There might be knotty questions about inheritance and legacy. It may feel as though family ties are bristling. But legal and financial disputes are the manifestations of the crisis on the periphery. In the centre, the rupture is more likely about grief, loneliness, betrayal. Feelings that are shaped by recollections of what one sees and hears and intuitions. By the senses.

For a macro-level entity such as a state to undo crisis and reinvent relationships between genders, races, class groups, religions, world regions, the senses are also an essential part of progress.

Sensuous Knowledge

For relationships to thrive, they require conscientious reinvention. The dendritic pattern is a valuable image to bear in mind for this purpose. To mitigate crises and manifest a synergetic flow in relationships, reinvention needs to be holistic. It has to be shaped by the mind, intellect, psyche, body and senses. This is what I refer to as 'sensuous knowledge'.

Sensuous differs from *sensual* insofar that sensuality is strictly related to the senses (touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing), whereas sensuousness affects not only your senses but your entire being—your mind, body, and soul.

The fragmented knowledge system of patriarchal society creates disruptions and mutations in the branch-like filaments of relationship as they attempt to reach in, out and in-between in time and space like elastic rope. When you dam a river, or cut off a tree, autopoiesis is blocked. Similarly, when hard data is enforced where what is actually needed is what philosopher Nora Bateson refers to as 'warm data' (qualitative information about interrelationships in a complex ecosystem) in her Warm Data Labs at the The International Bateson Institute, progress is stunted.

Amelioration to the crisis of relationship requires, therefore, space for movement. A flow in relationship on a communal, societal, state, regional and global level would mean that economies and politics are shaped in ways that adhere to such a flow. There would be an intention to discover and understand patterns of connection for example those that can be found in the bodies of all humans, animals, and everywhere in nature, and which are characterised by *branching* and *reciprocity*.

The future of human coexistence and planetary coevolution is vulnerably hanging by a thread. Instead of entangled branches in a fertile forest of interrelationship, socio-political dynamics are structured like frayed sprigs growing out of concrete searching for a natural habitat.

There is a different way to structure and organise society, it is neither impossible nor too late to radically change the status quo. But where we go from here has everything to do with relationships, and thus with moving away from the patriarchal idea that relationships are too 'sensuous', 'embodied' or 'feminine'. To model futures on inherent patterns in nature is to incorporate the senses in social change. It is to envision a world where crisis is met with a sense of direction and clarity, an ethics of mutual respect, and where humanity is holistically and sanely engaged in its own progress.