

## **CONSIDER AN ANT** **by Peter Holmes**

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The little eighth inch long ant that I see running purposefully across my kitchen counter following an invisible trail to the remains of ice cream in a small dish, to join its nest buddies in scooping up any sugar they can find and then following the invisible path back across the counter, along the window sill, to disappear through the smallest of crack in the wall. I have no idea how long a journey the ant has back to her nest or how many journeys she has made. I just see her as an intrusion to my clean and ordered life and mush her onto the counter with my thumb. This is the extent of my relationship with the ant unless a large number of ants turn up and I have to resort to harsher extermination measures. The ant is a fellow creature on this planet Earth, part of the interdependent web of life, but at that moment it is a threat to my sense of autonomy and control.

So this is the extent of my relationship with the ant. I know practically nothing about what its life is like. I have learned to classify it as an insect with 6 legs, an abdomen, a thorax. I have been told that it has a exterior skeleton of chitin and that it absorbs oxygen through a tracheal system of tubes. I have read that it lives in a nest with a queen ant that lays all the eggs. I think that most of the ants in a colony are female, infertile worker ants, and that the male ants are only good for sex. I know that there are many varieties of ant including the leaf cutter ants that grow fungi on leaves to feed their larvae. I have seen and been bitten by soldier ants in Africa. I have seen a squadron of ants hauling away a cockroach carcass hundreds of times bigger than each ant. No doubt there are scientists who study the life and anatomy of ants that could give me many more details but it has never been a priority for me to seek out that information. I am sure that somebody has some idea of the detailed biological machinery that runs an ant's body. But even an ant scientist who spends a lifetime studying ants can only know very little about what it is like to be an ant.

Here are a few questions that I have about the life of an ant: How long do ants live? What happens to them when they die? Do ants get sick? What happens to an ant that loses a leg? What do ants eat? How far will an ant travel to find food? How do ants mark their trails? What will kill an ant? How does an ant relate to an earth worm? What bacteria are beneficial and dangerous to ants? What is the story of the evolution of the ant? How does an ant know what work is needed? Do you have smart ants and stupid ants? Do ants fight with each other? Do ants have friends? How do ants communicate? What happens if an ant gets too hot? What happens if an ant get too cold? Do ants sleep? How does an ant learn to do her job? How come ants are so strong? Can an ant get arthritis? How does an ant relate to all the plants and animals in its native environment?

I am sure that we could go on generating questions like this forever and, if we gave it priority, we could come to know a lot more details about the external organization of an ant's life. However there are so many questions and so many other things to study that we can never make it our top priority. There are more than 12000 known species of ants on this Earth. There are 900,000 known species of insects and thousands of unknown species. There are estimated to be

10 quintillion insects on this planet (10 raised to the 19th power). There are around 9 million known species of plants and animals that are our fellow travelers on this spaceship Earth.

How can we have more than the broadest picture of each of these species and how they fit into the ecological balance of this planet? How can we possibly understand all the complex interactions between different animals, between different plants, between plants and animals? How can we have more than the smallest understanding of the lives and interactions of all the living things just in our own backyard?

And to add another layer of complexity: We have been trying to describe a typical ant and a general, average, typical ant life. It is like being a human sociologist or anthropologist and describing the human race without considering the individual life experience and perspective of a particular person. We have practically no idea what the daily life of an individual ant, let's name her Antigone, is like. We cannot put ourselves in the mind and body of Antigone and of the individual plants and animals that she meets in her daily round. No two interactions or connections are the same and are never exactly repeated. Her life is just as complex as our own. The complexity of the living ecology of this planet Earth is truly mind boggling and yet, like some magical machine, a sustainable living system is maintained that is creative and self-healing. This is the wondrous work of the process of evolution, that has, over billions of years, created us from stardust and will continue to shape the life on this planet for billions of years to come. Until we can expand our scope of awareness beyond self-centered and purely human concerns to hold in mind the trillion worlds alive on this Earth at any moment, and to glimpse ourselves exactly in that vibrant, seamless web of interconnectedness, we are living in a kind of madness - which is to say, not living in reality.

So how do we find our place in all of this amazing complexity? Clearly it is impossible for us to use our logic, our intellect to know exactly how things are in our world. There is just too much complexity that it constantly changing. I don't suggest that we should stop thinking, that we should stop trying to understand, predict, plan, and act but we have to accept that we can never know all the details and therefore the full impact of our actions. Like the butterfly flapping its wings on the far side of the Earth, we have an impact on everything we interact with and we change the world with our every action. All you can really know for certain is what your senses tell you at each moment: touch, smell, taste, sound. Everything else is an incomplete and approximate story.

Humans have been given this amazing gift of consciousness. We can observe ourselves, we can think and plan before we act. We are able to manipulate and control our natural environment. We can stand outside of the immediate demands of the Earth's ecology and even change the course of evolution. This gives us incredible power but also added responsibility. Again, where does this leave us in finding our place in the vibrant and complex life of this planet?

For me this is where the idea of soul comes in. The word "soul" has not been part of my vocabulary for most of my life. I have liked to think of myself as a good thinker who can understand the world through observation and logical analysis and soul is not real because it has no tangible or measurable existence. The word has also been tainted in my mind by its strong association with religion. But I have begun to see that there is another important story that puts soul, love, beauty and connection, rather than knowing and controlling, at the center of my

life. A story that helps me reconnect with myself, other people, and the Earth in all its wondrous complexity; that encourages me to seek and find my place in this magical mystery tour that is my life.

I have come to understand the notion of soul as having to do with connectedness,  
with finding my place in this amazingly complicated world,  
with finding the place where I fit,  
where I feel at home,  
where I belong,  
where I feel at one with everything around me.  
where I am more sensitive to the natural world that surrounds me and to the life and needs of  
Antigone

Soulful moments are moments of presence, moments of profound connection, with friends, lovers, animals, plants, trees, art, music, nature, food, smells, touch, sound, - where we just let go and become at one with the world around us. Soul knowing is a subjective knowing, a holistic feeling of unity and connection, where body and mind reach out and connect with our local ecology. Soul logic synthesizes rather than analyzes. Soul, if you like, is not an entity but an activity, an activity of connecting from moment to moment.

All of us have different soul needs, different ways of connecting.

One person may love to cook,  
another forgets the world while he is playing with a puppy,  
another loses herself in creating music,  
a child throws all of his body and mind into games of imagination.

Love is about losing yourself in connecting with another.

Beauty is seen in a soulful moment (soul vacation) when we take a vacation from ordinary activity in favor of a moment of reflection and wonder.

I realize that I have used a lot of words, a lot of intellectual tools, to try to explain something what cannot be explained but can only be experienced. I now invite you to join with me in trying to create a soulful, connected, moment right here and now on this river bank by the living artery of the great Missouri River.

So if you will, sit comfortably but alert, close your eyes, and go inside.

Pay attention first to your breath, noticing the inbreath and the outbreath and the pauses in between.

Then, still maintaining an awareness of breath, give attention to the sensations in your body. Start at your toes gradually move up your body to the top of your head noticing how each part of your body is feeling.

Then, with the awareness of breath and body in the background, pay attention to sound. Without getting into thinking and analyzing, just noticing sounds arising and passing away as you sit and breath. Be aware of the ever changing soundscape around you.

Now gently open your eyes and, still being aware of internal bodily sensation, give your attention to another person sitting close to you. Be aware that you are making a connection another human soul world with all its sensations and emotions, its hopes and dreams, with all its joys and worries. But in connecting with this person you are also connecting with part of yourself. The feeling of separation is only an illusion. If you like you and this other person are one consciousness seeing the world through two different sets of eyes. Put your intellect aside and let your soul embrace your connectedness.

Then allow this feeling of connectedness, this feeling of love and peace, to expand outwards to embrace all of the people around you. At the same time stay in touch with yourself, with the sensations in your body. Breathe and be aware of everybody breathing the same air, hearing the same sounds. We are all connected. I I live in you, you live in me.

And then give your attention to the rest of the world around you, the trees, the birds, the insects, the animals, the fish, the frogs, the earthworms, the single-celled organisms, the bacteria. Each living thing living its own life but intimately and vitally connected. Your life and well being is interdependent with all these other lives. I live in you, you live in me. The tree is me, I am the tree. You are not separate. All you see, hear, and touch is part of you. As you breathe you are the Earth breathing.

Breathing in I am alive  
Breathing out I smile  
Dwelling in the present moment  
I know this is a wonderful moment.

Repeat