

The Garrison Institute Presents: The Common Good Podcast Transcript
David Abram: Ecological Consciousness and the More than Human World (Episode 18)

[Please note: Although the transcript is largely accurate, in some cases it may be incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription software errors.]

[00:00:00] **Jonathan FP Rose:** This interactive online event is part of a continuing series of the Garrison Institute's Forum, pathways to Planetary Health. Um, and we, this whole series explores the moral, ethical, and human behavioral dimensions of the search for regenerative solutions. Um, it is now my pleasure to introduce our guest for tonight, David Abram, the Cultural Ecologist, a philosopher and author, a walker in the Wilderness, founder of the Alliance for Wild Ethics.

[00:00:36] David is known for connecting the philosophical tradition of phenomenology to ecology. He is a progenitor of the Ecos psychology movement. His book's becoming Animal and earthly cosmology, and the Spell of the Sensuous Perception and Language in a more than human world. David, we are so delighted that you can join us today and you know, I wanna start with this beautiful, so important phrase more than human world.

[00:01:03] So tell us about that.

[00:01:06] **David Abrams:** Oh, well, when I, um, started, uh, writing my first book, the Spell of the Sensuous, I, um. I found myself increasingly frustrated by the paucity of our, um, vocabulary by the lack of good, uh, ways or terms and phrases for speaking of nature. The term nature itself, um, was so readily, um, juxtaposed to culture as that which culture is not.

[00:01:44] So you had culture on the one side and nature is everything out there, um, um, that we go out into. And I knew that's not quite what I wanted to speak of. Um, there weren't a lot of other words and I was astonished by this. Um, I started writing about, well. Uh, human nature to say that we are nature too and non-human nature.

[00:02:11] Uh, but then there's still that divide, uh, like a fence between the human nature on the one side and non-human nature on the other side. And I realized what I'm interested in is, uh, a sense of, uh, nature or the wild or the breathing animate earth as that which, um, contains the human with all of our culture, all of our technology, all of our creativity is, uh, held within, nested within and permeated by, um, the, the animate earth, but that earth, that nature.

[00:02:54] Which holds us, also exceeds us. It's always more than just us. So I, I was really trying to speak of a subset within a larger set. The human has a subset of, and human culture all as a subset within the wider set. Uh, so I, I realized why not just call it there's the human world and then there's the more than human world, which includes the human, but always exceeds the human.

[00:03:24] And so I coined that phrase the more than human world to speak of that, um, of nature in that much broader and fuller sense as something that, uh, that contains us all of our audacious creativity and culture, but always exceeds us. Now, recently there's been, um, uh. Another term that's, uh, lofted itself into the, um, lingua franca of the environmental movement, um, the Anthropocene.

[00:04:01] And, um, this is kind of interesting. Uh, I've got many, many friends and colleagues who celebrate this term, uh, which also speaks of the human as deeply a part of, um, the, the Anate earth. Um, but it's kind of problematic for me because it suggests the Anthropocene suggests that the human is now in this new era, uh, that is now upon us, that the human is co-extensive with, uh, the rest of the biosphere.

[00:04:39] That it's really a human world. And Anthropocene, uh, gives our name now, not just to this era, but says in this, uh, new era. There is no more than human world. That is, there's nothing that exceeds the human here on earth. Um, the human is, has, has, has reached its tentacles, our tentacles into every nook and cranny of the real, including even the farthest stretches of the atmosphere and the oceans.

[00:05:16] Um, and I think that's kind of a goof, uh, mostly because it, it precludes any step back toward restraint and real humility. It says, yeah, that, um. It's kinda like that old, uh, storekeeper's phrase, you broke it, you own it. Well, we broke this biosphere, so now we own it. It's up to us to do, uh, with it what we can and to engineer it, um, basically to serve our own purposes.

[00:05:57] Um, and I think that's, uh, a horrific mistake. Of course, the guys and gals who coined this term, the geologists, um, Tsin, Stefan, the others who, who coined the term Anthropocene, um, were not poets. They were not, uh, attending to the, um, you know, the deeper felt associations and, uh. And implications that go with this word and the metaphoric resonances it had, um, they didn't seem to realize that very quickly the term Anthropocene could begin to be felt as a kind of aspirational term.

[00:06:45] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm,

[00:06:46] **David Abrams:** yes. Let us now be as gods, we now have to take the reins of this biosphere. Um, so like I said, I think that's really unfortunate and um

[00:06:59] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Right. I think

[00:06:59] **David Abrams:** massively problematic.

[00:07:01] **Jonathan FP Rose:** I think it's proposed as a recognition of our impact. But I want to go back because we are constrained by the English language right now and we're constrained by, you know, about the weird culture.

[00:07:17] Um, so weird is anachronism that stands for Western industrialized. I forgot what the E is. Uh. Rational and developed, uh, so it, anyway, it's the prosperous West and, um, it's a very

limited worldview. There's very interesting field, uh, analysis of, uh, psychology papers in which they realize that essentially all psychology experiments are done on white graduate.

[00:07:43] Oh, white is tested with white, uh, they're done on white, you know, western educated graduate students. And therefore it's actually a very limited set of, of, uh, mental perspectives. And they started taking some experiments to indigenous people and realizing that we were not understanding the full range of human, uh, potentiality.

[00:08:01] So, so what are some of the other words that, I mean, you have to translate 'em in English so we understand them, but what are the other ways that indigenous peoples think about this magnificent whole that we're part of? What are the words they use or phrases?

[00:08:15] **David Abrams:** Oh, you know, um, generally there in, in, in most, um.

[00:08:23] Indigenous and traditionally oral cultures, uh, there isn't even a word to name what we would call nature because it's just, it's, it's everything. It's what there is. So you can't step back from it, uh, to, uh, talk about it as if it's one thing. Um, it's a boot bit strange with us. We speak of the environment, um, as if it's one thing and we take all of this outrageous multiplicity of shape and texture and color and voice and flatten it all down into this one thing, the environment, uh, which puts it all in relation to us again.

[00:09:06] Um, there are, um, there are terms that gesture toward it, but, um, yeah, if, if I could just dial back a moment and, and say. One word I would like to float. Um, and, and there have been a lot of, um, my colleagues have been suggesting other terms for, you know, what we're currently calling the Anthropocene, as you said, it's, it's, it's meant to name our, uh, largely, um, deleterious influence upon, uh, the living systems of this planet.

[00:09:50] Um, I think it's a pretty good name for the era where just emerging from, we've privileged the anthropologists or the human, uh, for the last couple thousand years thinking that the world was put here for us and um, uh, other animals here for us humans to use for our own purposes. Um, yeah, Anthropocene could be a decent name for that whole era.

[00:10:18] Now we're beginning to realize what we've wrought and, uh, it's so, uh, horrific. The number of cataclysms, uh, um, snowballing on every hand, intensifying, um, what's coming down in the oceans, what's coming down in the atmosphere, the loss of habitat, the outrageous number of species biting the dust or being pushed to the very edge of oblivion, and then kicked over that edge by our lifestyles.

[00:10:50] Not because we humans are mean, but because we're kind of oblivious in not really noticing these other shapes of sentient and sensitivity are really here with us in the world.

[00:11:04] **Jonathan FP Rose:** So you use this beautiful word in the becoming animal, which is cons.

[00:11:10] **David Abrams:** Say it, say it again.

[00:11:11] **Jonathan FP Rose:** You use the word ity.

[00:11:14] **David Abrams:** Consanguinity

[00:11:16] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Consanguinity

[00:11:17] **David Abrams:** Yes.

[00:11:18] Means sharing the same blood.

[00:11:20] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Right? So let's talk about our consanguinity with, with this more than human world.

[00:11:31] **David Abrams:** Well, to speak of that, sharing the same blood, the same flesh, uh, is to suggest that it is not our minds that really are abstract intellects that connect us, uh, deeply to the other species, to the plants, to the winds and the weather powers. But it's really our body that is our, um, embedment within this more than human field of life we call.

[00:12:13] Earth in the modern West, we've come to think of the body in fairly derogatory ways. Um, we think of or tend to identify ourselves with our mind or with the spirit, uh, uh, as if mind, spirit, soul is some disembodied, utterly immaterial, ephemeral, uh, mystery that descends from some realm behind the stars and lodges itself in our skull.

[00:12:49] Um, and we identify nonetheless with that ephemeral bit of fluff. Um, and the body is taken And so often spoken of as a kind of exterior armature or architecture or uh, a kind of robot that is deployed by the mind inside our heads. I wonder. It does seem to me that that bespeaks a massive dissociation, not just from our body, but from our ity, from the fact that we are creatures co-evolved here like all the other animals, and co-evolved with those others with hawks and ravens squawking as they swoop down overhead, um, and earthworms making their way through the soil and hummingbirds and oak trees and humpback whales and spiders spinning their web in the corner of your apartment.

[00:13:49] We are co-evolved with and really are a variant of all these other shapes of sensitivity and sentience, and it's this bodily form, this two-legged, two armed form that is our access to all these other styles of vitality and uh, rhythm. And dancing life. So what if we were to identify not so much with the mind inside our heads, but with our ani, with our bodies as the very body of the mind?

[00:14:26] You could say that we think not with a little sentient, um, spirit inside my brain, but I think not even just with my brain, but with my whole animate body, with my fingertips, which know much more than I do about the textures of the world, much more than, than my, my verbal mind does. Just as my toes know more about the soil in tandem with those earthworms, um, is it possible to celebrate.

[00:15:00] Our ani melody, not just to acknowledge it, but to honor it and dig it and realize that it's our body that gives us access to the ability to empathize with any other shape or style of, of life to, um, empathize with any other style of se really.

[00:15:25] **Jonathan FP Rose:** And so how do we drop this, this, uh, over identification with ourself and our mind and expand our being to have that sense you're talking about?

[00:15:39] What do you recommend?

[00:15:42] **David Abrams:** Well, that's a huge question. Um, I mean, I think what I'm recommending first and foremost is just beginning to affirm and acknowledge that we are animals. One of the Earth's animals, uh, a very canny, crafty, sly, sometimes goofy, sometimes very gracious animal, but an animal nonetheless.

[00:16:11] And hence in many ways just one of the gang with the other critters. Um, start noticing how much we have in common with other mammals, for instance, uh, who share our bilateral symmetry. And yet most of them walk on all four legs. Wow. We've got four legs too. And yet, at some point in our story, we stood up on our hind legs and balanced there and got used to balancing on our hind legs.

[00:16:44] Wow. At which point all the trees became our, our allies in verticality. In some ways, the trees all became really closer allies to us than most of the other animals because they're vertical like we are, which is weird among the mammalian clan. Um, that is start noticing how, how much you share with the other animals, with the plants, like those trees.

[00:17:15] Um, but also by virtue of being a body, not just in a body and not just having a body, but being a body. Um, you have a lot in common with all these other bodies around, most of which ain't human, but not just the other animals and the plants, but the body of that mountain, the body of this storm cloud that is just now sort of barreling.

[00:17:41] Toward me from, uh, the Hamus Mountains in the distance. I'm speaking to you from the upper Rio Grande Valley of Northern New Mexico in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Um, this huge valley dotted with various, uh, native pueblos around of the Tewa and tewa speaking peoples. Um, it's a gorgeous place, but a huge storm.

[00:18:08] Just before we got online and linked up with one another, Jonathan started, uh, blowing and blustering and slamming the doors in my house. Um, but yeah, that this body gives me a deep affinity with any other body, including the body of that storm cloud. And so I can, if I allow that I am a variant of all these other shapes, then I'm able to.

[00:18:40] Lean into, to suss out, uh, what's going on within those clouds. I can feel into the weather, um, and, and suss out the mood of of, of this roiling sky. As long as I allow that, the sky itself is a body that it is, it's a kind of life of vitality. But if I speak of the world just as a set of objects, basically inert or determinate mechanical processes, I can't really suss out right what's going in, what's going on in some other object.

[00:19:23] I can't actually relate to an inert object or to a programmed set of mechanisms, but if I allow that, it's all alive, it's all flesh. That this two legged, two armed form is just my smaller body, but the earth is my larger flesh. This immense spherical metabolism in which our individual physiologies are all embedded.

[00:19:53] Um, so these are a few of the clues to get into being an animal, to celebrate. One's materiality, one's bodily substance, opens relationship with all these other bodies, all these other material, uh, fleshly presences and yields a sense that the land itself is not just a thing, it's a, it's a breathing body.

[00:20:27] **Jonathan FP Rose:** And we now, we know this so much more from knowing about. The intelligence and relationship of forests and how they're all woven together. There are vast webs of this. You know, when, um, Darwin in the fifth, uh, edition, um, of the Cent Man said, described the survival of the fittest. What I always view, as he said, the survival of those that fit the best, that are, that fitness is actually, um, is evolu.

[00:20:58] What evolution is endlessly doing is weaving together. Um, uh, so, uh, a phrase that has, that I've been really thinking about a lot recently is this idea of mutuality. Because part of what I think we need to do, and, and that's why I really appreciate your critique of Anthropocene, is we need to decenter ourselves that we actually over aggrandize ourselves by thinking of ourselves as selves and, and mutuality.

[00:21:28] Conjure up the isness of relationship versus the independence of personhood.

[00:21:35] **David Abrams:** Hmm.

[00:21:36] **Jonathan FP Rose:** And what are your thoughts about mutuality?

[00:21:40] **David Abrams:** It's such an important, uh, notion. It's such an important word. One I would pair with it is also reciprocity.

[00:21:51] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Mm-hmm.

[00:21:52] **David Abrams:** Give and take That is always, um, integral to any real and half healthy relationship.

[00:22:03] Um, it has reciprocity, uh, built into it, mutuality, as you say. Um, and we think of, of such reciprocity as something that is practiced just among ourselves, among us, two leggeds. But it takes only a little bit of pondering to realize. Well, for instance, that there'd be no air for us animals to breathe. All this exquisite oxygen is precisely what's being breathed out by all the green and growing plants that surround our homes and our cities.

[00:22:49] Um, so the plants are giving off this oxygen. All us animals are taking it in and we inhale it, circulate it through our, um, organism, alchemize it within our cells, uh, transform it a bit, and then we breathe out. Uh, this air now transformed and precisely this. Carbon infused air

we breathe out is the very ingredient that all these plants need for their photosynthetic metabolism.

[00:23:23] So what we breathe out, all the plants are breathing in what the plants breathe out. All us animals are breathing in. Talk about mutuality, talk about reciprocity right there. Built into, uh, the, the heart of our present, moment by moment experience of breathing is this deep reciprocity with the more than human, uh, world.

[00:23:55] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm. You know, it's even the reciprocity, as they say, turtles all the way down, goes all the way down. Because in the evolution, the very first cell there were mitochondria and there were kind of proto cells, and the mitochondria had the energy, but in essence, no body. And the proto cells had body but no energy.

[00:24:15] And symbiotically, uh, I think about four and a half billion years ago or something like that, they merged. They didn't merge. The mitochondria entered the cell and powers the cell, and the cell feeds the mitochondria. And it is still to this day that the mitochondria are separate entities within the cells.

[00:24:35] Um, but they co-create each other. And those are, they are the base. So the very basis of life is, is a res, a reciprocal, uh, arrangement.

[00:24:46] **David Abrams:** Yeah, that's symbiosis. I see. You've been reading the wonderful. Revolutionary American biologist, Lynn Margolis.

[00:24:54] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Exactly.

[00:24:55] **David Abrams:** Um, uh, yes, her work showing that, um, that evolution is not just by any means, uh, uh, just a fight in tooth and claw, uh, of competition, but it is so much built out of cooperation, um, strange alliances, symbiotic, uh, allegiance, um, and at the very heart of competition too, that those organisms could outcompete others that were better at cooperating with and aligning themselves with other creatures.

[00:25:41] So it's not that it's all a play of niceness and sweet harmony. There's a lot of, um. Uh, uh, wild competitive gusto and, uh, bumping. There's

[00:25:54] **Jonathan FP Rose:** a lot of eating going on.

[00:25:56] **David Abrams:** Yeah, there's a lot of eating and engulfing one another. Just as those, those, uh, cells engulfed the mitochondria. Um, uh, it's, uh, a lot of gusto in all this.

[00:26:09] Pass the salt, please. Yeah.

[00:26:12] **Jonathan FP Rose:** So I wanna move on. Uh, Joanna Macy describes this whole relationality as an eager dependent process. Where in change and where wherein change in choice doer indeed, person and community are mutually causative and morality is grounded in

this interdependence. So I'd love to talk about the morality that, uh, that if one recognizes this deep interdependence.

[00:26:45] The symbiotic, relational, re, re reciprocal relation.

[00:26:49] **David Abrams:** Hmm.

[00:26:50] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Then what is the morality that comes from that?

[00:26:54] **David Abrams:** Hmm. Well, I tend to think, uh, not so much in terms of, uh, morality, but, but ethics,

[00:27:06] **Jonathan FP Rose:** yeah. Um,

[00:27:08] **David Abrams:** and in a sense, what we've already just been, uh, been batting around, speaking about is how strangely unethical it is, uh, to conceive oneself as, um, an autonomous, uh, thing.

[00:27:30] Even an autonomous mind that's just sheathed inside this body. So we think of, um, that, uh, very. Smart Frenchman Rene Descartes with his Latin phrase, *Koto, ergo*. So I think therefore I am, that is thinking is of the uttermost essence of what I am. It's because I think that I am, um, that leads, uh, rather directly into fairly, uh, callous ways of treating the world around us.

[00:28:11] Um, if other organisms don't think the way we do, don't give evidence of thinking, well, we treat them as though they're just yes, mindless machines. Um, but it also bleeds into our human relationships. A friend of mine, wonderful, um, herbalist named Stephen Howard Buhner came by. To visit, um, first time we met a few years ago and he, he, he brought up de card.

[00:28:42] He said, you know, I think he kind of goofed up there. Um, shouldn't he have said, I feel therefore I am. I feel therefore him. Which, okay, that's a step. That's a step right direction because feeling is something you do with your whole body, not just, uh, with your mind. But it occurs to me that the real reply and the most audacious response to Descartes, I think therefore I am is, is you are.

[00:29:16] Therefore I am. You are. Therefore, I am. That is, I have no existence. If not for you, you, oak tree. Uh, use strange, uh, clump of sagebrush use spider doing your thing. Um, um, yeah, weaving your web between these, these two branches, that because these others exist, that enables and calls me into existence that I am relational from the get go.

[00:29:54] Um, so it's a way of, of, of thinking to notice again and affirm one's embodiment and hence one's embedment within this blooming buzzing proliferation of shape and color, uh, and rhythm that we call earth. Um, is to say and, and, and recognize that we exist only by virtue of all of these other dancing.

[00:30:28] Styles of experience around us, including the plants, including the fungi, including all the other critters, but including as well the mountains and the rivers, uh, forests, yes. But also the storm clouds also that blue sky also this blizzard of snow bursting open around me. Um, so it's to recognize that, yeah, we are pretty interesting, unique beings with wonderful capacities just as frogs are very interesting with their own dazzling capacities and apple trees able to make apples out of their own limbs.

[00:31:15] Whoa, I can't do that. And that Raven is able to fly with its own limbs. Geez, that's astonishing. Um, to realize that we are unique. But each being's unique in its own way. And, um, to get into that and to recognize, um, that healing in a sense, that duality between the mind and the body and saying, it's this body that is sentient and that is speaking right now, healing that duality is not a way into oneness.

[00:31:55] That it's all one, it's rather a way back into multiplicity, to discovering the outrageous and irreducible plurality of life. The multiplicity of the real in its wonder.

[00:32:13] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Yes. And that wonder is very robust, but maybe fragile. I had previously a guessed, Tony Hiss who said that if you went from the, if you were to drive a car.

[00:32:27] From the deepest part of the ocean to a mile above the highest mountain that Mount Everest, it would, it, it would take 20 minutes. That, that's how thick all the whole realm of life is thin layer that covers the earth. And so there's really a miracle in this, this interaction zone, this zone in which all this beauty and biodiversity richness takes place is in this very, very thin zone.

[00:32:57] It's a very precious thing. It may be lots of other ones in the universe, but we don't know about that. But what we can tell, this is a very, very precious thing. So I want to go back to the morality. So, um,

[00:33:13] **David Abrams:** I also, I I, I, I do wanna, before we, we, we leave it, um, link to what you were just saying. Um. With your other guest, Mr.

[00:33:24] His Tony has Tony Hiss. Yeah. Um, it'd be important to journey, not just to the top of Mount Everest, but um, 'cause that's not where life stops.

[00:33:40] **Jonathan FP Rose:** No, he, well, he said a mile above, but keep going.

[00:33:42] **David Abrams:** Oh, good. A mile above. Yeah. Because, um, it turns out that this, uh, invisible atmosphere that stretches, uh, yes. From the surface of the ground, um, up, up, up to those clouds, lofting all those clouds and then stretches many, many miles above.

[00:34:05] Yeah, above there. Um, um, that we had. Taken all that to just be, you know, a bunch of gases that right happen to be drawn to earth by earth's gravity. Um, but it's just in our own lifetimes, Jonathan, that we humans have begun to realize that the air is actually percolated into being by all of the organic life on earth's surface, underbreathing with one another.

[00:34:46] That all of us in this grand conspiracy, we could say conspiracy, meaning breathing together, um, conspiring together, underbreathing with the plants, US animals, underbreathing with the soils, underbreathing with the oceans percolate into existence. This invisible medium of air that, um. We had taken so much for granted thinking it was just, you know, a bunch of gases.

[00:35:16] But it, it was James Lovelock, Lynn Margolis, great collaborator and colleague in the Gaia hypothesis, who's sampling the chemical constituents of the air discovered in the late sixties, early 1970s, that the earth's, the atmosphere, the composition of Earth's atmosphere was very far from equilibrium, very far from that various gases were present in proportions that should be canceling each other out, bringing themselves to a kind of stable equilibrium.

[00:35:51] And yet it stayed in this very non-equilibrium state, continuously. How was this possible? And, and that led Lovelock to realize that the atmosphere was being generated. Monitored and modulated by all the life down here, inner breathing with one another, that the air is the very signature of a living planet.

[00:36:18] That it is, it is a living organ of the earth. So we might sense it as a very thin layer, but it, for our perspective down here in its depths, we don't even really live on the earth. We live down here submerged in this invisible mystery we call the air or the atmosphere. We live inside a breathing earth, not on its surface.

[00:36:51] Um, so I wanted to mention that. Because I think that experience of being inside something like in the belly of a beast, um, or in a vast story that is unfurling itself all around us, and we are just one of the characters, and that blade of grass is another key character. Um, that this is a sensation and a sensibility very close to that of our indigenous oral ancestors and to the indigenous traditional, uh, um, native sisters and brothers, still among us in this world.

[00:37:34] That sense of not just being on the earth but in the

[00:37:39] **Jonathan FP Rose:** earth, right? And actually that story expands to the whole universe. So it's, it, it's, it's a, it's a way beyond, and I think the key to the story is decent. That it's that it is, uh, and by the way, there's another story that's very decentering, which is quantum mechanics, which sees, so what you've described is a world of deep reciprocity in way of a lot of mutual entanglement.

[00:38:12] And that what we see in quantum mechanics is that actually, that the nature of nature is that it is not solid and mechanical at all. I, I said to a quantum physicist, you've misnamed it calling it quantum mechanics 'cause that's too mechanical. I said, you know, quantum is, sounds like a fixed thing, but you have no fixed thing.

[00:38:28] And mechanics sounds like, you know, a logical process. But that, but that you don't have either. I says, you got the wrong name. He said, you don't understand at all. You know, like, of course we have the right name. So, but, but anyway, but the truth. We don't have fixed quantum. We actually, if you go all the way in, there's nothing, there's essentially almost nothing there except this amazing flow of energy and relationality from which all this gets birthed.

[00:38:55] So what I'm, I guess what I'm saying is you think of our relationality in this amazing web of life on earth, and you think about the relationality of that to this vast universe. And you go in and you think about the relationality that, that there's no fixed things in that it's all made of. And it's just one vast decentered amazing, astounding, unfolding process that we have to have.

[00:39:23] And so then this sensing being is this amazing gift of opportunity to kind of, I was gonna say concretize, but realize the magic story.

[00:39:38] **David Abrams:** Hmm. Yes.

[00:39:44] I do think we've had in our overeducated over technologized, uh, civilization, a kind of fascination for, uh, um, for the cosmos, for the universe, for the stars. Let's get outta here. And, um, a kind of, we've been high on the light, drunk on the sunlight. Very keen. And can we get to some of these other stars?

[00:40:15] Well, it looks like we might have to get to some of our more local planets first. Uh, maybe let's just get out to the moon. Um, but there's, there's been this impulse to move up and out and to identify with the, the vastness of the universe itself. Um, and my sense is that we've been leaping over. This more immediate, uh, cosmos we called Earth.

[00:40:47] Uh, taking it as a kind of drab, um, uh, just ground where we happen to be stuck and the real richness and revolutionary weirdness of this moment mm-hmm. In, in our collective story, it seems to me is, is the dawning recognition that this earth is alive in ever so many ways that it is filled with enigma mystery and that our fellow creatures are as outrageous as any alien life form we could ever conjure with our imagination.

[00:41:35] Um. So to really just tune into the ways of octopus

[00:41:39] **Jonathan FP Rose:** wall,

[00:41:40] **David Abrams:** um, what an astonishment. Um, so I think I'm also share a fascination with the stars, but, um, I've come to sense that earth is my access to the rest of the cosmos. And it's only by getting really here that, um, I have a chance of seeing clearly just what even those other planets, uh, are, are, are like, um, I think we are far more informed by this sphere of earth than we realize.

[00:42:22] **Jonathan FP Rose:** So I'm gonna get to some questions soon, but I wanna ask you one more question.

[00:42:25] **David Abrams:** Sure.

[00:42:26] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Would you tell us a story, anyone about a journey to meet? Shaman, a wise person somewhere in the indigenous world, somebody who had a mind of you, or it can be many. You can tell many stories, as many stories as you want, that saw the world in this in another way.

[00:42:55] **David Abrams:** Well, isn't any encounter, any relationship, even with your, with your lover, a kind of gradual discovery that the world you thought was one way. The very same world you inhabit is also experienced through another set of senses, uh, in a richly, strangely, different manner. Um, I think what you're alluding to is, is, uh, is a journey I undertook.

[00:43:28] Um. Not to find a wise person, um, or to fall into that, that very old habit in the west, uh, as if wisdom isn't everywhere, um, including in the tip of one's nose. But, um, my craft and what launched me on much of my own work was my earlier profession as a slight of hand magician. I, uh, was house magician at Alice's restaurant in, uh, that storied establishment in New England.

[00:44:05] Um, but you

[00:44:05] **Jonathan FP Rose:** can get anything you want

[00:44:07] **David Abrams:** at Alice's restaurant, accepting Alice. Um, um, but she was a wonderful boss. Um, I'd arrive each day and say, Hey, Alice, what's cooking? And she would say, Hey. David, how's tricks? Um, but I wasn't doing tricks there. I was working table to table, doing these kind of minor miracles for people, um, startling their senses as best as as I could.

[00:44:36] Um, um, sleight of hand is really, it's a set of mudras. It's a set of hand gestures by which you coax the spirits close that maybe they will come and descend and start making very magical things happen. And, um, it was a delight to have this as my craft working first at Alice's and then throughout New England, then throughout, uh, Canada and, and, and the United States, um, in many clubs.

[00:45:06] Um, and then traveling through Europe as a street magician. Um, coming back to North America. Performing some and then journeying as an itinerant magician through Southeast Asia, through Nepal, through Indonesia, through, um, yeah, the Himalayas in Nepal through Sri Lanka looking to meet the traditional magicians or medicine people that apply their craft in, uh, the village back waters of these cultures.

[00:45:40] Um, and approaching them, not outwardly as a researcher or anthropologist, but as a magician in my own right. Um, um, and trying to peak their curiosity with my own sleight of hand, um, skills. And in fact, this was very successful. Um, and sleight of hand proved to be a kind of skeleton key, opening up the inner sanctum of these.

[00:46:10] Culture is so weirdly different from my own. Um, and I got in way over my head, um, uh, drawn into contact with some of these outrageously bizarre individuals called, uh, dukus in Indonesia, called RIS in Nepal, these medicine people or ONGs or saucers. Um, and being asked to trade magics with them

[00:46:39] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm.

[00:46:40] **David Abrams:** Um, asked into their homes to even participate in their ceremonies.

[00:46:45] And, um, and I learned so much, um, and it transformed me and transformed my life. Um. Ostensibly my, uh, journey was looking to meet them in order to study the uses of magic in medicine, in folk medicine and healing. Um, because these magicians were the healers for many villages in their vicinity. But it turned out much to my surprise that this, their ability as, as, as witch doctors and healers was not their primary role in their communities.

[00:47:27] Uh, it was more for them. They understood their, their ability to heal folks as a kind of byproduct of their more primary role, which was to tend. The boundary between the human community and the more than human community of beings, the community that includes us two leggeds, but includes as well, all of the other walking and crawling and slithering and swooping squawking folks who, uh, dwell in that terrain and all the rooted peoples that grow and leaf out and drink the sunlight in that valley.

[00:48:05] But also the weather powers and the storm clouds. These two were assumed to be alive, awake, aware, and the mountains themselves and the rivers and even dry riverbeds were assumed to be living sentient powers. And the magicians were those folks who were most attuned, most susceptible to the solicitations of these other than human styles of life and vitality.

[00:48:35] And. This became their responsibility to tend the boundary, the relational membrane between the human world and the more than human world in which the human gang is embedded. Making sure that the human community never takes more from the land. Then it's returning to the land, whether with prayers, propitiation praises, and, um, but offerings of, uh, sustenance and nourishment to the forest, to the other animals, even to the, to the local insects.

[00:49:11] So this is the primary work of the magician in a, in a, in a genuine culture, in a healthy culture. I came to realize. So that's one small bit, um, in response to your question of how I stumbled. Into my work as a cultural ecologist and my particular fascination with what we could call the ecology of perception or, or the ecology of sensory experience, the way our animal senses, our eyes, our skin, our, our nostrils, our ears bind our individual nervous systems into the encompassing ecosystem.

[00:49:54] But my fascination with sensory experience and perception comes from my earlier work as a sleight of hand conjurer. And I've never stopped doing that work. Um, but perception, you see, is the very medium of the sleight of hand magician and of the indigenous tribal saucer. We all magicians work with that very malleable fluid.

[00:50:24] Texture of perception itself. Magicians are those who are adept at shifting the senses, shifting perception and changing the world itself by changing the ways we see the world and hear the world and taste the world.

[00:50:43] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Wow. And what you've actually described may be the missing role in this time. That we need those people who hold the responsibility to mediate between humans in the more than human world in that sense of to enforce the reciprocity, to, to encourage the mutuality, to respect the, to bring the gratitude, to re, to, to heal the relationship.

[00:51:14] So it seems to me that that's what's entirely missing from our culture. Um, yeah, we are and, and might be. The lessons of that might be the pathway back to balance.

[00:51:26] **David Abrams:** That is what I take, uh, to be certainly the heart of my work, but what I'm trying to infect as many others with as I can. Um, just the importance, right?

[00:51:40] Ethical primacy of that, of that work, particularly for those folks who are, uh, uh, a bit more sensitive than others. Uh, the empaths, the folks who feel others in, you know, even when they don't want to. Others percolate through your organism. Um, um, it's kind of problematic in a culture that assumes only humans are really awake and aware and conscious.

[00:52:07] But if you have that propensity, recognize that it's a great gift because it may be. Too sensitive to hang out with other nervous systems shaped just like your own. And you feel what other people feel all too easily, but it may be just right for entering into a rapport with a toad or with an oak tree or a clump of weeds.

[00:52:36] And, um, and that becomes your, your craft, your responsibility for your community is tending the relation between the human world and the, the living land itself. So, yeah, I think that is key.

[00:52:53] **Jonathan FP Rose:** I'm gonna go to some questions. Sure. Um, so one, by the way, somebody asked about the phrase more than human world and just proposes that we use the phrase of lead belly who said.

[00:53:03] We're all in the same boat. Brother. Um, several questions to go to this question. Is the aliveness that you speak of equally in the nature of the animate and the inanimate world?

[00:53:17] **David Abrams:** Hmm. Okay. Hang on. So you mentioned, first the question in relation to, uh, the more than human world, just to say, yeah. I'm just convinced that we're human only in contact and conviviality with what ain't human.

[00:53:36] That, uh, in a world that is completely human, uh, where we've pushed everything over the brink of extinction except those other organisms we've engineered right to suit our purposes. I don't think we stay human. I think we lose not just our humanity, but our sanity because we're human only in contact with what isn't human and, and in conviviality with what ain't human.

[00:54:01] Um. So a certain humility is deeply called for. And it is why I would, I'll circle back to someplace where we started and say, I would suggest another term for this era we're calling the Anthropocene. Um, uh, my scientific sisters and brothers say, yes, David, look, we need a word that names the human as being so central to this metamorphosis, to this transformation in the biosphere, in the climate, in the soils of this world.

[00:54:41] And so I think, alright then instead of using the word anthropo, why don't we work with the word human. And the fact that the word human is cognate with the word humility.

[00:54:53] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm.

[00:54:53] **David Abrams:** Why don't we call this era the humility era, the era of humility.

[00:55:00] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm.

[00:55:00] **David Abrams:** Um, and some people say, oh man, that just doesn't sound right.

[00:55:04] Humility, it sounds too much like humiliation, to which I reply. Yeah. Just right. Because we ought to be humiliated by what we've wrought and we need to step back and practice a new kind of restraint and deep humility in the face of this world of wonders where there are so many other powers and beings that we are beholden to and we need to walk with real care for our relationship with all these other beings.

[00:55:38] The one in, in the short term. This era of entering into this new one would be known perhaps in oral tradition as the humbling,

[00:55:52] **Jonathan FP Rose:** right.

[00:55:53] **David Abrams:** That's the era we're living through now. The humbling. Yeah. Okay.

[00:55:59] **Jonathan FP Rose:** A question says, I'm stuck pondering the neurobiology of predation social hierarchy hurting. Um, and they seem to operate pre subconsciously in our culture and, um, we are violent, et cetera. Um, so what do we do about that?

[00:56:18] **David Abrams:** Can you repeat the question?

[00:56:20] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Um, yeah, I'm stuck. I am struck, I'm stuck pondering the neurobiology of predation social hierarchy, formation and hurting.

[00:56:33] They operate so rapidly, so pre subconsciously that cultures and consciousness can't seem to prevent this violence and from happening. So they're saying they believe that predation and social hierarchy, formation and hurting are within the nature of humans. And what do we do about that?

[00:56:55] **David Abrams:** Uh, it's not just in the nature of humans.

[00:56:58] I mean, there's predation to be found, uh, pretty much wherever we turn in the earthly world 'cause things, uh, to live.

[00:57:08] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm.

[00:57:08] **David Abrams:** Other things. And, um, where no big exception, uh, to that rule. But as we were saying before, Jonathan, there's also a tremendous amount of, uh, alliance, symbiosis, um, uh, friendship also in the more than human world.

[00:57:32] Um, can we, um, can we get out of our propensity for scapegoating and, uh, always when th get tough looking for someone to blame and try and, um. Inflict as much pain as we can or bomb them, uh, uh, to smithereens. It seems to me the key, uh, medicine for so many of our social ills, uh, is, and, and our massive social injustices is beginning to open our relationship beyond just the human to, uh, practicing relation with everything else, with the other animals, with the plants, with the breathing ground underfoot.

[00:58:30] Um, this of its very nature eases the brittleness of our human relations. Uh, when we think that only humans are really present and conscious in the world, we're trading around all of this mono, all of this intensity. Among just ourselves, um, uh, craving that more than human richness, that nourishment our, our nervous system once got from practicing relationship with hummingbird and storm cloud and iceberg and, um, and, uh, and clumps of, uh, sagebrush and Aspen groves and humpback whales.

[00:59:16] And suddenly we're born into a culture that thinks that only humans are really creatively present and awake and aware. And so the only place I can turn for relationship is toward another person, another human. Um, but my nervous system is still craving all of that full round nourishment I once got from relationship with everything because it was all alive for, for our indigenous ancestors.

[00:59:48] And so. Opening relation once again to the whole, more than human field, eases the brittleness of so many of our human relations. But when I, when I'm trying to have a real solid, intimate relation, even with my sweetheart when I'm not practicing a rich relation with the living land itself, um, it loads way too much pressure, even on our most intimate relationships.

[01:00:17] I mean, I love you darling, but I'm just not feeling quite met and she's feeling the same in relation to me. And it blows out every relationship, one after another, um, just breaks apart because what we're craving is relationship, yes, but not just with one another. We've co-evolved with all these other shapes And so relationship needs to open.

[01:00:49] Everything else. I think that's the deepest medicine for healing many of our social ugliness and injustices.

[01:00:59] **Jonathan FP Rose:** I'm gonna go to one last question. Um, there've been many, but I'm gonna sum it up with one 'cause we're running out of time. So somebody says, I adore you're writing, and number one, are you thinking about a next book?

[01:01:12] And if so, what would it be about? And then number two question is, if you could recommend three books by other people, what would you recommend?

[01:01:25] **David Abrams:** Uh,

[01:01:26] **Jonathan FP Rose:** so first,

[01:01:27] **David Abrams:** um,

[01:01:28] **Jonathan FP Rose:** are you thinking

[01:01:28] **David Abrams:** about writing

[01:01:28] **Jonathan FP Rose:** book?

[01:01:29] **David Abrams:** I am.

[01:01:32] Yeah. Yeah. I don't primarily think of myself as a writer. Um, um, but, um, every now and then I do sit down to, to write, uh. One of those big, uh, lumpy things we call books. And, uh, I've just embarked on, on, on a new book. Um, I don't wanna say much about it. Don't wanna scare those spirits away, but it's a book about, uh, time

[01:02:01] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Hmm.

[01:02:02] **David Abrams:** And the Earth,

[01:02:04] **Jonathan FP Rose:** right? Can't wait. Yeah. And books you'd recommend of others.

[01:02:09] **David Abrams:** Oh God. Zoos so many. Um, much as I want to, you know, mostly recommend that we put our books aside and unplug our computers and step out of doors and start dancing with everything else. I do love the written word. And, um, so, um, a few books.

[01:02:31] I'd say, um, I'll dig in on my friend Richard Power's novel, the Overstory, or. This other audacious, uh, counterpart, one could say by Rob McFarland called, um, underworld. Mm-hmm. Um, uh, those are two recent works. Um, of course, braiding Sweetgrass mm-hmm.

[01:03:00] **Jonathan FP Rose:** Uh,

[01:03:00] **David Abrams:** is a dazzling piece of work, um, um, by a, a wonderful sister of the Potawatomi, uh, community.

[01:03:13] Um, um, but works also by folks who are not still alive and among us. There's such, uh, delicious work to be found. I'd wanna recommend people read some of the early novels of Jean Anou Great, uh, French novelist, his novels of the twenties, and. I think thirties, particularly one in translation called, uh, the Song of the World, and another called Joy of Man's Desiring, um, um, or a book by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas called Reindeer Moon, um, or a book of poetry, uh, by, um, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

[01:04:03] Um, um, but I could go on and on, so you may be better. Stop me.

[01:04:09] **Jonathan FP Rose:** So thank you. We're gonna, you know, I just had a thought, um, which is, there's a fellow philosopher in Garrison, the town where we are named David Rothenberg, who's written a series of books about music. And nature. So he has y bird sing bug music, thousand miles song Survival of the beautiful Nightingales and Breland.

[01:04:33] And these are all weaving an appreciation for incredible music that these different species make and how we, and

[01:04:41] **David Abrams:** David plays music with these, with, with the insects, with the cicadas currently. Um, he plays music with the whales, with the Nightingales. Yeah. He's a wonderful, uh, brother and colleague. Yes.