

Academic Commentary for the film

# Conversations on interdependence

What is interdependence, and what role it play in our lives? In what ways are we all connected? How do we feel disconnected or connected to other people and the world around us? These were some of the questions I set out with when I began my inquiry for this film<sup>1</sup>.

The idea of separateness – between humans and between humans and the more-than-human world – may be one of the root causes of our ecological crises (Charlton 2008; Johnstone and Macy 2012). If we recognize our connectedness to other beings, and our dependence on others for survival, we may live much more wisely in the world (Charlton, 2008). I wanted to talk to my closest family and friends about these issues, both because I was curious about what their personal feelings of interconnection or disconnection were, and because it was a small way to begin to have these important conversations in my life outside of school. In our conversations, I hoped to capture moments that felt alive and honest, relating to the contributors' felt experiences.

## Interdependence: The Context

There is a pervasive ideology in our society that focuses on our individuality and separateness, emphasizing the discrete parts, rather than the connected whole. This culture is partly the expression of philosophical and scientific undercurrents running back to the time of Galileo and Descartes, with the adoption of the view of nature as a machine, and with 'conscious', 'thinking' humans as separate from mechanical nature (Capra, 1996). This understanding of relationships ignores our role as a small part of a larger ecosystem. As Johnstone and Macy (2012) point out, the "notion that we can be completely independent or self-made denies the reality of our reliance on other people and on our natural world" (p. 51). None of us would physically survive without the plants offering their oxygen through photosynthesis, without the weather cycles providing rain or without fellow humans living and doing that which keeps society alive.

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<sup>1</sup> Interdependence and interconnectivity are not completely interchangeable, but are closely related. I may be speaking of feelings of connection or disconnection as part of the overarching conversations on interdependence.

Interdependence also goes much further than our physical dependence on other beings, and their dependence on us. There is a more esoteric interconnectedness, of which our conscious mind is only a small part (Charlton 2008). Gregory Bateson saw the world as a “single intermeshing hierarchy of process relationships that are all ‘mental’ in kind” (Charlton 2008, p. 31). We are all a part of this mental process of being, as small parts of larger minds, or interfacing with other minds, or acting as home to other minds nesting within us (*ibid*, p. 33).

As long as there is a perceived division between mind and nature, our feelings of empathy or responsibility will be limited to a relatively small moral universe. Gregory Bateson “saw ecological destruction as being caused by human linear-conscious purposefulness and by our conviction that we are somehow separate from the rest of the living world” (Charlton 2008, p. 5). Similarly, Arne Næss contended that if we see ourselves as an integrated part of Nature, ecologically sound actions would flow from us (Harding, 1997). It was very interesting to see how my friends and family related to these different types of interconnection and interdependence (without assigning them the labels as I have).

### **Our Conversations**

Before I move on to consider their contributions, let me make a few remarks on the making of the film. Although all the words are the participants’ own, my framing and questions have clearly influenced the conversations we had on interdependence. Very often I did not frame the questions in terms of “interdependence”, because I found that this led to very abstract answers on a ‘macro’ level. In order to find stories that felt honest and personal it was much better to ask the participants about their lives; what do they love to do?; what makes them feel alive?; when do they feel a sense of meaning or connection? This proved more successful than wider questions on interdependence, which could be overwhelming, almost numbing. I found this process, of changing the questions in order to change the conversation, very interesting and instructive.

The participants had many different ways of approaching the theme of interdependence. My sister Anja (sitting in the field) was most concerned with the physical manifestations of interdependence, and how many people are so oblivious to it. She says people don’t seem to care about the consequences their actions have on others and the environment, despite *knowing* that their behavior could cause harm. I find this interesting; is it because we don’t identify with the wider world (as Næss suggests), and because we’re not connected to our wider ‘ecological self’ (Harding, 1997) that we knowingly make these

choices? Mari (filmed in black and white) says she thinks many people feel alienated by the world we live in, because we don't *know* the world around us. Bateson suggests that it is only through the more-than-conscious knowing that we can truly come to know our world, and act wisely in it (Charlton, 2008).

Mari and my mother (by the fire) spoke of the feeling of connection to the natural world, and the sacredness of nature. Witnessing the becoming of life and being in connection with it through gardening gives Mari a sense of flow – like being in a trance. My mother also speaks of the holiness of nature, saying how natural it seems to give thanks to the Sun and Moon gods and also relating her own experience of meeting God in nature. These types of 'deep experience' can help us realize our ecological self, and seeing the world as animate and alive (Harding, 1997). This also relates to Gregory Bateson's thoughts on the processes of mind and its sacredness (Charlton, 2008).

Through the editing, soundtrack and use of footage I was hoping to enhance the contributions made by my family and friends. In many of our conversations there was an air of ambivalence; an amazement and reverence at the connection between all humans and the more-than-human world and – yet – a sadness and despair at being enmeshed in a society and culture where our existence often is harmful to other humans and nature. I hoped to capture this almost melancholy beauty through the imagery and soundtrack – the falling snow is cold, yet beautiful and calming; the fire is intriguing, yet dangerous; the clouds are sublime, yet out of reach and vaguely ominous.

A big challenge in the project was to create a cohesion and natural flow weaving together the diverse threads of experience and reflections offered by each of the speakers. Despite varying in kind, there is an underlying theme and tone, which I have tried to enhance and emphasize. Viewers may think that the film doesn't have a conclusive end, and this reflects the nature of our conversations - they didn't have a conclusive end and usually brought up more questions than answers. In the future I may try to make these inquiries more focused, in order to make the coherence and flow more easily visible.

More than the product of the film in itself, it feels important to be having these conversations – about interdependence, about how to live wisely and beautifully in the world – with my family and friends and with myself. The process of making the film, informed by Bateson, Næss, Macy and others, has deepened and nuanced my understanding of interdependence, and opened a space to have some of these important conversations.

## References

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