

Are we intelligent enough to know how intelligent animals really are?

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Body-Mind Centering Presentation: 22nd May 2021: SOMA France, Valcivière, Grand Massif, France

Body-Mind Centering (BMC) offers me a way to be in the world; a different way than is perhaps currently familiar to many people...a *waie* to be in the world in fact similar in meaning, in a sense to the Tao, a waie of being in the world that I have been exploring cultivating, tending and developing in my practice as a Biodynamic Farmer (BD). So actually, for me it is a marriage, a partnership that I have been exploring *in practice* for about ten years between BDs and BMC.

It was with great sadness that I learned that the UK Conservative government had taken out the description of farm animals as sentient in about 2018, under the ministry of Michael Gove. This is not only erroneous in fact but also to me feels like dangerous territory in both the material sense of the industry but also in a wider sense, the realm of the wellbeing of the essence of life and the realm of what one might describe as the soul.

In this presentation I would like to take this time to share with you, from my perspective as a shepherd how I have come to deepen my appreciation for my flock of sheep and to learn how intelligent they really are. My small flock of sheep number about 50. We farm on a small hilly area just south of the Dartmoor National Park in Devon, in SW England.

For many years I have been exploring somatics and BMC as a way of knowing self, other and place through direct experience in the body and exploring the application or practice of this in other fields including tracking, foraging, natural horsemanship, performance making and walking, as well as farming. Sharing BMC with folk in these other traditions I have come to learn from them the value of a somatics approach to knowing and perceiving oneself, other and world in a wider context and taken the opportunity to share this approach in these fields, in workshops over the years.

Today, I would like to share with you how I have learned from my sheep through the practice of BMC; a radically different approach to studying animals that in many research contexts would be an anathema. In the modern agricultural sector we have been researching and “improving” farming techniques for many decades based on quantitative data, more often than not collected in controlled conditions. It is common knowledge that in western agriculture animal disease, immunity to meds and antibiotics and the general wellbeing of our livestock is and continues to be unsustainably compromised and to such an extent that it is impacting on the health of planetary life systems. I therefore suggest that if more research and more “improvement” is to save us it will need to be of a very different kind.

Sheep are considered to be “flight” animals alongside their four-legged cousins’ horses, as opposed to say, cattle who we might be considered as “earth” animals. And, it is a well know fact in many contexts within the farming industry that the biggest contributor to dis-ease and illness in sheep is stress. This is recognised in many aspects of farming including: homeopathic veterinary, herbal medicine for farm animals, organic farming and even traditional veterinary now. Sheep are tremendously sensitive, loving, social animals who “jump” and/or “shut down” rapidly and in an instance, in many of the contexts and environments in which we currently farm today. Therefore, one question might be “how does this impact on their health?”

Research of different kind: How I have come to “study” my sheep is through the BMC “Mind” of cellular consciousness. To be with them in the same way we might be with a client in an individual session, or a baby in an IDME session, or teaching a workshop; “holding the space”; being peaceful, without ambition, not coming or going, just present. And, from this “mind” a context emerges that allows us to meet and that allows the other to meet us, on their own terms. To meet or to “match their “tone” and for them to meet or to “match my “tone”.

Somatisation:

IN PRACTICE: I introduce the notion of kinaesthetic empathy...a way of perhaps meeting sheep “knowing” of themselves and world that is not *pretending* to be a sheep but is perhaps applying the process of embodiment to meet the sheep in there “sheepness”

- Experience silence
- Four legs...to let go of arms and hands for a moment and appreciate mouth/nose as limb to reach, grasp, hold, nurture and relate.
- Eyeline
- Walking on two toes
- Communicate through movement, touch, gesture, position – rarely if ever use voice.
- Temperature 40 degrees c
- And finally focus: ENS: four stomachs, longer intestine – the rhythm and thinking of ruminants: knowing our self and world through our “gut brain” and rel. to stress and IS.

In sum, I am still learning from my sheep..but for us to perhaps begin to consider how we might i. reduce the use of meds and consider medicine efficacy such as drenches for worms etc, ii. reduce use of machinery in sheep farming, of mechanisation, fossil fuels and excessive energy use; may not only offer better financial sense, may not only (as some of us already know in some farming contexts) produce better products (meat, milk, cheese, wool etc and potentially breeding stock) but, also and radically so potentially be better for our hearts, our soul.

It’s a kind of magic to be in relationship with the four legged grass eaters without ambition or agenda, not seeking anything, not analysing, objectifying them...objectifying us...just being...it is The Process of Embodiment (from BMC)....and “...the source of this process is love” (p157 Sensing Feeling and Action Bainbridge Cohen 2nd ed.)...

‘The soul is the same in all living creatures, although the body of each is different.’ Hippocrates



Cellular touch: With Long Tail, Big Meadow, August 2020. Photo copyright: Emma Freeman. Used with permission