**What is it we reach for?**

The word “*umwelt*” would appear to be experiencing an uptick in use. It’s a good word, and the increase in its appeal perhaps reflects a greater regard for the sentience around us, non-human as well as human, plant as well as animal, right down to the single-celled bacteria. For myself, I’d include stone and air and water as well. Not because that would satisfy all the definitions of “sentient” but because we need all the reminders we can get regarding our presence here in what is, it turns out, a more-than-human world.

The word “*umwelt*” was defined by zoologist Jakob von Uexküll in 1909. It refers to the world *perceived* by a particular being. Two creatures might occupy the same space but have quite different *umwelten*. This is true of any two people, of course, but becomes more marked when the creatures are, for example, a bat and a human, or an elephant and a shrimp; a one-hundred-year-old tree will notice and respond to different things than will a newly winged dragonfly.

And yes, to an extent this is obvious. We can’t all build our picture of the world using echolocation or the far-travelling infrasounds too deep for human ears. We don’t all have hypersensitive nerves at the ends of our noses or hairs on our skin for picking up shifts in electrical charge. There are also the sensory capacities we remain ignorant of, and the quirks, as well, of individuals. An *umwelt* can be a complicated thing. And the biases of our own experiences render it tricky to confirm our imaginings of another’s perceptual world.

It remains, though, worth trying. It’s worth trying because of what it teaches us about ourselves and the life we share the planet with. Because it reminds us *humans* are not the only sentient beings with an interest in being alive on Earth. And because as well as being a way to acknowledge differences, it’s an exploration that shows just how knitted together we all are.

I recently heard a speaker explore the *umwelt* of a tree – the responsiveness at the root and rhizome level, the behaviours sparked by the detection of certain molecules in the air, the photon-triggered responses in the leaves, the internal water flow, controlled in part by the stomata and linked to the cycles and variables of the day and year. What this speaker wished especially to emphasise was our interconnectivity with the tree, via the oxygen it releases and that we breathe in, our outbreath, in turn, mingling with the air the tree builds itself out of.

“By simply tracing our outbreath”, this speaker says, “we realise the reciprocity between all major kingdoms of life, pulsing with one harmonious rhythm”. [Ersin Han Ersin, *What’s it like to be a giant sequoia tree?*, hosted by TED]

That’s a nice idea – sharing breath in one harmonious rhythm. But there’s a problem. It ignores the multitude of ways in which life on Earth is entangled, harmony being generally conspicuous just now by its absence. Breath is *part* of a much larger exchange.

Everything we take comes from somewhere. Everything we hold, each new experience, every trend or fashion, will relate in turn to the experiences of the life around us. The tofu I eat relates to the forest that was cleared to allow the soybeans to be planted. The concrete all around us relates to river-bed destruction, the river sand being an ingredient for high-rises and city paths. And here, the carbon emissions I’m responsible for, adding to those of all the Earth’s farms and cities, relate to the cider gums on the highlands struggling now to survive in a climate they’re not attuned to.

To acknowledge this world as one we share with wondrously diverse and exquisite life forms is not, sadly, to revel in harmonious interconnectivity. I wish it were. It is to realise that if we value this richness of life, and if we understand our dependency on the ecosystems bound up with it, then for everything we do there are questions we must ask. Questions about cost, true cost: by what is the loss of another’s world, another’s life, an entire species, justified?

On offer beside the talk on the *umwelten* of trees was another talk I couldn’t listen to. The summary described it as a talk on the use of AI to enable us to carry on enjoying, in the virtual sense, the wildlife that is fading away around us. Can we use AI, it asked, to preserve our memories of the fading natural world. There’s a part of me that weeps for each forest felled, each approach to extinction, each waste pile, each push for yet more growth. And for sure, with some expletives thrown in, a world that offers immersion in a virtual memory of a thing we have destroyed is not one I wish to be around for.

What is different, then, about this virtual immersion compared to the work around us now? How are Troy’s references to these weeping trees not also offensive as a diversion from the action required? The answer is as beautiful as Troy’s work. As beautiful as the layers, one over another, that refuse, for me, this or this memory, this or this point in time, and raise, instead, the presence of something still alive, something we are still inside and can respond to, meaningfully, and with love. And surely this is something we *want* to respond to, vulnerable as it is, joined to us as it cannot help but be.

Troy’s strength is to see, in the connection he feels, not an icon or a moment but a fragile glimpse of that from which all our moments come. The precise existence of this stream, this tree, this stone, enough to halt us in our tracks, is embedded in something larger – time, the chance of life, a chance we are here to honour. Troy works *with* and *despite* his photography, each image becoming not a memory but a pulse, one his work causes me to reach my hand into that I might feel the flux of its weather. It’s this that led to the poems I wrote in response to Troy’s work. Poems that, like the images, like our exchange, exist by some means neither of us are really clear about. Somehow a gap in the machine spat out the chance of it. Perhaps you’ll be as surprised as we are. We hope you’ll share the sense of what lies behind them.