

From the Magic of ToGaianness

Ngapartji-Ngapartji in Indigenous Australia

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C'est une discussion autour du terme australien Ngapartji-Ngapartji qui se traduit par « réciprocité » dans le monde occidental. L'auteure et son partenaire Robert (Taffy) Seaborne, plongent profondément dans les concepts évoqués par ce terme, en particulier la part du moi dans un plus grand réseau ainsi que l'éventuelle adoption du terme ToGaianness. L'auteure considère les implications potentielles de ce modèle sur notre compréhension du moi et de l'autre et établit la relation entre le concept de la « pensée maternelle », de l'empathie et de la pratique des soins.

I was introduced to the word “ngapartji-ngapartji” by my partner Robert (Taffy) Seaborne¹ who had experience and conversation with Anangu elders of Uluru in Central Australia: it is an Indigenous Australian term. *ngapartji-ngapartji* has generally been translated into English as “giving something in return”—taking turns at being given to²; but this is really a very poor sense of it. *ngapartji-ngapartji* is more like being pleasure’s source and pleasure’s home at the same time³—not knowing when one is “giving” or “receiving”: receiving is a giving, and giving is a receiving.⁴ The closest translation of the term (and mode of being) may be “reciprocity”: it is an exchange that happens simultaneously like it does in the peaking of the breath. It is not considered, it simply happens—is done.

My partner has related how it took a long process to come to deeper understandings of the relationship that this term was referring to. He said: “My earliest understanding did not satisfy my curiosity about this apparently universal Indigenous principle. It wasn’t until an Anangu *tjilpi* (a friend) explained to me that every story is like an onion with lots of layers to be peeled away before reaching

its core that I began peeling away my own layers of this fascinating expression.”

For Taffy, the layers have gone like this:

First layer: dictionary definition: giving something in return, taking turns.

Second layer: “golden rule” of “do unto others what you would have them do unto you”: that is, giving others what you may think is “good” for them, perhaps what they don’t want, like building them houses and teaching them new religion. It may be altruism disguising imperialism.

Third layer: “moral empathy” of do unto others as they would have you do unto them: this is, giving from within the other’s frame, what they want. Empathy is not “goody-goody” altruistic stuff, “doing” for others for yourself. It is feeling from within the other’s frame ... as a mother does, as a new mother/parent may struggle to learn. What are the needs of the child, the needs of the other?

Fourth layer: “what one does to other one does to self”: that is, understanding that we are one globe, one body. One cannot bang on our big toe without hurting the whole body.

It seems a question of understanding who the self is; that self is a nested reality, always within the context of other and All-That-Is (larger Self). It is not thinking of relationship with other as a duality; and thus the need to

weigh things—the giving and receiving—up on scales. Each self has complete integrity, and is integral with All-That-Is; each is not “two halves of a whole”—as is commonly expressed and thought particularly in female-male relationships. *nagapartji-ngapartji* may be a place that understands that complete wisdom is within each: a respect for the other’s sovereignty, the other’s inner agency, and their sacred direct participation in the Creative Cosmos. They are a whole person, a whole Universe.

“ToGaianness” is another possible word for such relationship, coined by my partner Taffy. This term expresses an extension of relationship with other, which is always a relationship with Mother Gaia to begin with; that is, all relationship/togetherness is in the Mother/Gaia, our Context. And then any practice of attending, care-giving, nurturing, parental/maternal practice, lends itself to understanding *ngaparti-ngapartji*. Such attentive relationship as is required especially by tending a child, or dependent other, will nurture understanding of this reciprocity.

There is a possible *fifth layer* that Taffy identified, and it is expressed in the poem “Given To” by Ruth Bebermeyer:

I never feel more given to
than when you take from me—
when you understand the joy I feel
giving to you.

And you know my giving isn’t done
to put you in my debt,
but because I want to live the love
I feel for you.

To receive with grace
may be the greatest giving.
There’s no way I can separate
the two.

To my mind this seems fraught with danger in a context where each self is not felt as sacred subject: that is, it may result (and does/has) in apparent consent to being plundered. Yet perhaps that is what Earth says to us? She as Mother offers Herself like this? What has been lacking in many cultures for some time is the feeling for Earth or other as sacred subject; so She and other have been plundered. When there is perception of Earth as sacred subject, or other as sacred subject, there may be “receiving with grace.”

What strikes me from the poem are the lines “*my giving isn’t done to put you in my debt, but because I want to live the love I feel for you*”: that is, the giving doesn’t operate out of guilt or obedience, “shoulds” and “have to’s,” “thy

will be done,” or “I’ve done this for you, so . . .” The giving operates out of desire. That is the only kind of giving I am interested in, is one that comes from desire to give. This is an ecological psychology.

Taffy has commented that one of the amazing things about being asked for money or whatever in Northern Territory Australia, by Indigenous persons, was that “if I said ‘no,’ it wasn’t a problem—it was *my* problem perhaps.”

Love may be understood more as a *receiving* of each other, not so much a giving. *ngapartji-ngapartji* may be a word for “love”? It is a reciprocity that is beyond dualism: “there’s no way I can separate the two” . . . the giving and the receiving.



Radha: Goddess Beholding Herself, Blue Mountains, Australia.
Photo: Glenys Livingstone

This image of the Goddess beholding Herself is one that may express that the Universe is a con-sensual reality. The Deity/Goddess is primarily in relationship with Herself. She sees *Who She is*. What is a “good mirror?” Perhaps one/ones that reflect who we really are, and which reflect that we are primarily in relationship with self. We respond to others from this . . . and thus co-create the relational web and the Universe.

This “seeing” is complex: we cannot touch without being touched. The seeing of self draws forth the other also at the same time. We co-create each other: for example, this co-creation happens when I recognize how I have called forth the beauty (the beloved/prince/goddess) that I see in the other, that my seeing actually participates in calling that forth. The seeing may call it forth: and there may be recognition of my co-creation of other . . . my own power in this. And it is received if they desired to be seen in the way I saw them; my seeing drew forth those qualities perhaps dormant in them that they wanted to



"The Birth of the Goddess," from Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, plate 155.⁵

express and manifest. This is how we co-create this place for ourselves—personally and collectively.

It reminds me of what Sara Ruddick named "maternal thinking," a style of thought that may arise out of maternal practice—or the practice of "Care": wherein one develops a metaphysical attitude of "holding" as against acquiring or possessing, because one knows one cannot possess. It gives rise to a humility—not self-effacement, but respect for dynamic reality, for the transitory *Event* that this place of being is. There is also acceptance of an independent other—who is an "open structure." This practice of Care—parental/maternal practice, also may give rise to "attentive love": learning to "love a child without using it or owning it, which is a discipline requiring effort and self-training." This mode of attention is to see the child's (or other's) reality with the patient loving eye of attention ... an intense attachment but also a detachment, a giving up, a letting grow.

As I see it, the practice of Care is a mode of learning *ngapartji-ngapartji*—where one is in deep reciprocal relationship with other. It is recognizing that being is essentially about relationship—one's existence is not possible outside of Context. We are in Context; "to be is to be related" (Swimme and Berry 77). There is the need

to understand our *primary relationship* before we can get anything right ... which is an empathy—knowing primary relationship. We are primarily in relationship with Gaia—this is not just Earth. Earth Herself is in relationship with Cosmos—there is no seam separating Her. She is a seed in the Womb of Space. So it is a relationship of the small particular self with the whole Place in which we are primarily. This Larger Self that each being always is, is not separate from a primary relationship with small self: this small particular self who is Gaia.

Self-knowledge is essential: regard for the self. It will mean a regard for the self of the other ... all selves. Understanding that all selves need "agency"—the power to act, and be the cause of things. Empathy is not possible without this.

We cannot be the observer without affecting what we are observing. "Watching" is a participation. "Presence" is a participation. Learning is always two way—a flow in both directions: both teacher/speaker and student/listener are in-formed. It is like the peaking of a breath: there is an exchange of form and dissolution, of self and other. It is a communion, a "sacred interchange" which this whole Place is/may be, at all times. In the above image, the Goddess is emerging, being helped from the water/

earth, being received, and She is also receiving them—it is a communion experience of joy.

When one's passion is poured forth, there is always receiving at the same time—like the peaking of a breath. The pouring forth is not a martyrdom: it is a Radiance, which is a fullness of being and dissolving at the same time. *ngapartji-ngapartji* is like the peaking of a breath, when fullness is poured forth—there is innate *co-incident* exchange.

In the “giving,” in the expressing of a blessing, we receive in the speaking. The speaking is a receiving, as we are heard, It is a blessing to speak the blessing. It is worth contemplating: is self only expressed when the expression is heard/received? Brian Swimme says that, “Self-expression is the primary sacrament of the universe” (147): the universe itself expands, rushes away from itself with news of itself, an urgency to unfold. Perhaps this urgency, this exuberance of being, assumes a hearer, a receiver. Then there is *ngapartji-ngapartji*, to Gaianess—conscious relationship.

This essay is based on a presentation with this title by Glenys Livingstone and Robert (Taffy) Seaborne at the Goddess Association in Australia (G.A.I.A.) Conference, 2008.

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Endnotes

¹Please see the PaGaian Cosmology website for more about Taffy (Robert) Seaborne.

²As it is translated for example in *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary* 2nd edition compiled by Cliff Goddard, p.84.

³This is a relational mode that Brian Swimme describes in *The Universe is a Green Dragon* (79) when he is speaking of “Allurement.”

⁴Taffy Seaborne has this understanding of *ngapartji-ngapartji* gathered from his own reflections and experience and conversations with Anangu elders of Uluru.

⁵“The Birth of the Goddess” is from the Demeter Temple

at Locri, Italy, dated 480-450 BCE; now housed in the Museo Nazionale delle Terme, Rome.

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FRAN WESTWOOD

Making Kin

for Randy and Edith Woodley

Invite the stranger in.
My teacher said it.
His people know it.
Breathe it.

One spring,
welcoming me
to their wide table,
never to stay foreigner,
orphan.

Word and table—
flush salad bowl, farm garden
soil under nails, symbiotic
praying lips, dusty feet
and palms

surprising me
with the extravagance
of embrace, for
*No one should travel
alone.*

—Cherokee Wisdom

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