



UPPSALA UNIVERSITET

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Fairy benches and a spark of magic

Before writing this reflection, I decided to take a stroll in the forest to remind myself what it feels like to be fully emerged in nature. You would maybe expect from someone who studies historical ecology that they would be in nature all the time and feel a strong connection. However, living in a city (even one surrounded by forests) - and being confronted with modernity everywhere I go - can even cause the ones interested in the earthly to ignore their connection with it. Whilst walking through the forest I tried to notice what it did to me and what feeling *exactly* I was seeking after. Occasionally, I caught myself looking on my phone and responding to messages; again the luring of modernity. Somewhat disappointed in myself and my inability to make a genuine connection, I walked on. Just when I wanted to return home, I saw these lumpy, oddly shaped, brown pieces on the side of a tree. I wondered what they were and walked towards them. Seeing the lumps more in detail, I quickly realized they were mushrooms, and this particular type in Dutch are called ‘elvenbankjes’, which translates to English as ‘fairy benches’. Thinking about this word and closely looking at the tree made me smile; even if I didn’t want to, I couldn’t help but think about these little fairies coming out at night and sitting and chatting on these ‘benches’ under the night sky. Just like that I was reminded of what I was seeking after; nature can evoke a little bit of magic. It can spark your imagination and give you a feeling that cannot be expressed in words. But with the *right* words, language can too evoke a spark of imagination.

Henrik Hallgren (2022) in his lecture about ecopsychology mentioned this as well: our relationship with nature is the last little bit of magic left in the world. And where he said that words limit us in our relationship with nature, Abram (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019) says that words still have a little bit of magic left in them because they have the ability to shape our worlds. He spoke of an indigenous story where humans and non-human animals spoke the same language and a person could turn into an animal when they wanted to, and the other way around (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019). Language was something magical in this world; if you wanted something to happen you just had to say it (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019).

I think I agree with them both. On the one hand words cannot express the way nature can make you feel: when you wake up on a Sunday by the sunlight peeking through your curtain and the birds trying to tell you you’re missing out on a beautiful day by staying in bed. Or when you are swimming in the ocean, and suddenly rain pours down and the only thing you can feel is water, and you become part of it for a moment. Reading descriptions like this (or hearing

them) can spark those moments of magic in your memories; you probably thought of a time where you experienced something similar with nature. Words can be the spark that evoke the magic, the imagination, but the actual feeling that emerges is impossible to express in language.

If I think about language that *does* spark this magic, I think of stories. A good example is the language Kimmerer (2013) uses in 'Braiding Sweetgrass'. Her words take you with her through the fields of goldenrod and asters she admired in her childhood, up along the bark and branches of the maple trees in her garden with her children. This type of language speaks to the imagination because it uses descriptive words, metaphors and details which quite literally forces you to slow down and think about nature with more care. As she mentions herself (Kimmerer, 2013) the language on the opposite side is the language used in science. Where words used in stories can almost make things levitate, scientific language plops you back onto the ground with a harsh bang of rationality and distance. She describes science as being a language of objects and with that it does not speak of beauty or details; it misses the magic.

As Abram (2020) states:

Language is a beautiful thing. But those of us who speak, who use words (which is pretty much all of us) – and especially those of us who take up the craft of writing – it's our responsibility, it seems to me, to always be tending the language to keep it from desiccating, keeping our language alive and brim full with meaning (p.3).

So, we need to create this aliveness (magic), and especially in science on the basis of which most of our perspectives on nature are formed. Words like 'gravity', 'anthropocene', and 'environment' often only provoke a scientific equation or definition (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019). Both Abram (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019) and Kimmerer (2013) have their own ways of bringing back this aliveness into language. Abram does this with gravity as he sees this often only equals a law in physics (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019). Instead, he makes the term more visual and descriptive by comparing gravity to the attraction you can feel for your lover. This constant longing for each other, tension, and push and pull motion. He describes it as an almost erotic feeling of attraction, which is why he gives the term the name 'eros', which was the Greek god of love (Aspen Global Change Institute, 2019). Kimmerer (2013) tackles the *deadness* of the scientific language by turning to words from her native language that speaks of non-human things as animate (to be a river) and human-made things as inanimate. To give an example of how *I* would like to bring back aliveness and magic into scientific words, we need to go back to the forest.

After seeing the 'elvenbankjes' I began to feel the connection with nature again. Putting away my phone, standing still and looking up to the crown of the trees. It was a beautiful sunny

day and I had already noticed the effects of the sun that morning: it charged me, I could almost breathe again, and life seemed a lot easier. When standing there, looking up at the trees I thought of how the tree and the (upcoming) leaves must feel the same, taking in all the sunlight; stretching their bark and stem to reach the top even more. I automatically fell back into a scientific way of relating to nature by thinking of photosynthesis. Broken down, photosynthesis exists of the Greek terms ‘phōs’ which means light and ‘syntithenai’ which means putting together (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.). The sunlight thus puts the tree together; by nourishing it, it builds the nerves in the leaves all the way down to the roots in the earth making a life network of light highways. I imagine a golden, warm, glowing light, almost like maple syrup, entering the tree through the tops and the leaves to then drip down through the various veins in the tree leaving them pulsing with a golden glow to eventually disappear into the earth.

“Hey look! The light is dripping the tree with life again”.

References

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