

# The World's Hidden Harmony

How Recognizing and Cultivating a Whole-Body Intelligence  
Can Help Us Rediscover Our Place in the Universe

An interview with Philip Shepherd by Tim McKee



Tim McKee is the publisher of North Atlantic Books, which has published all of Philip's books: *New Self*, *New World*; *Radical Wholeness*; and *Deep Fitness*, co-authored with Andrei Yakovenko and released October 19, 2021.

**Tim McKee:** You've written, "The segregation of our thinking from our being is the primary wound of our culture." Could you elaborate?

**Philip Shepherd:** Our culture has many wounds, but to my way of thinking the deepest source of them is our belief that our thinking happens in the head, and that it can happen more clearly if we stifle all the noise that goes on below the neck. As a culture we reinforce that message so systematically that it eventually feels right to us. When I say 'systematically', imagine what is happening to the intelligence of a child as it's made to sit in a chair at a desk seven hours a day, five days a week, nine

months of the year for twelve years. That suppression of the body's energy is a suppression of its intelligence. There are no two ways about it. The child is explicitly instructed: "fill your head with these ideas and pay attention to the head of the class and you will get ahead." We learn, not exclusively from the education system—it's modeled all around us by the adults we grow up with—to dissociate from the intelligence of the body. We learn that lesson before we are old enough to question it. We come to believe that we can think more clearly using the segregated portion of our intelligence in the head than we can with the whole of our being.

**McKee:** And we come to believe that our success depends on that segregation.

**Shepherd:** Yes, but it's exactly contrary to what has enabled us to survive for most of human history. Hunter-gatherer cultures don't live in their heads—they rely on an attunement to the world that involves the unsegregated intelligence of their entire being. They feel animals moving through the jungle. They feel the gifts of healing offered by plants. They rely on such knowing.

There's a brilliant memoir by Robert Wolff called *Original Wisdom* in which he describes his efforts to experience that way of knowing. It began when he went to Malaysia to conduct some research. He heard about about the Sng'oi—an indigenous culture living in the jungle, and he was deeply drawn to learn more about them. When he started spending time with them, he was consistently baffled by their ability to know things that they should have no way of knowing.

For example, he might decide on a Saturday morning, "I could go visit a village today." He'd get in his car, drive a couple of hours to a jungle path, walk the path for an hour and a half—but before he arrived at the settlement he'd encounter someone waiting on the path to escort him the rest of the way. How did they know he was coming? He didn't know himself until that morning.

The subtitle of Wolff's book is *Stories of an Ancient Way of Knowing*. That ancient way of knowing relies on a hidden harmony in the world that speaks directly to the body—but the wound we live with, the one that confines our thinking to the silo of the head, dulls us to it. We go round and round in our heads, stuck much of the time in thinking about our own thoughts, and obsessed with gaining perspective on our situation.

And there's no question that perspective is invaluable, but perspective is made possible by distance. You don't have perspective on a situation when you are in the middle of it. You gain perspective when you step back from it. And we do that by retreating to the head. But when we remain there, we are exiled to a realm that cannot feel the world's intimacy or its harmony. And then we wonder why we feel disconnected and anxious.

**McKee:** I'm having an image of the brain needing a new job description: You're welcome in the room because you have important views to share, but you're not going to run this meeting anymore. We value that perspective you give, that distance you can get on situations, that reflection that can happen in the brain, so we're not kicking you out. But running the show? No longer. Because otherwise it seems that the collective, if it was a business, would fail.

**Shepherd:** It would go down the tube—in part because living in the head makes everything feel abstract. That's what the head specializes in—abstraction—and the word 'abstract' literally means “to draw away from.” In many other cultures the center of thinking is experienced in the body, which has a borderless affinity with the world around it. It is attuning to the world in every moment. We have 'drawn away' from the world and the body's intelligence so that neither can be felt in its full reality. Being chronically disconnected like that leaves us feeling apart from, separate from, everything around us. So we feel chronically alone.

And that sense of being alone has become central to our culture's understanding of what it means to be human. We are advised in countless ways that we are all alone. We're taken as seedlings and stuck into a pot of aloneness and told to grow there. But when you internalize the message that you're essentially alone, you initiate a cascade of effects.

First of all, you start believing that everything you feel and think is your exclusively private experience. In reality, all experience is shared experience. As you sit beside me now my heartbeat is being felt by you and is affecting you. The Heart Math Institute has done a lot of research to demonstrate how potently what the heart experiences is shared. But the fact is that everything we experience ripples into the world around us.

Yet our experience *feels* strictly private. As soon as you accept that premise, your primary job in life becomes to supervise your experience and manage it. Make it feel good and make it a success. Well, you cannot take on that job without entering a divided state: one part of you supervising and the other part being supervised. That deepens the wound between our thinking and our being. And when we normalize to that division, the primary relationship in our lives can only be our relationship with the self. We live in self-consciousness. In reality, we are held by the life of the present, as is this planet, everything contributing to the eternal weaving of wholeness—and so we might recognize our relationship with the wholeness of the present as primary. But no—it's as though we've taken the spotlight of our attention and turned it on ourselves, casting the world into darkness. By dividing the self we've also endarkened our partnership with the living world to which we belong.

**McKee:** I wonder if this segues a bit to this term you use, “whole-blindness.” I'm wondering if you could share more about that term. What do you mean by it?

**Shepherd:** I literally mean that we as a culture are blind to wholeness—but that requires some explaining. To begin with, it helps to understand that wholeness is our primary reality. Everything within the universe affects everything else. The cosmos is a unity. Despite the efforts of science to speculate ever more minutely about the smallest indivisible particle of nature, the cosmos is actually the smallest indivisible unit. How do you split the cosmos from itself? You can't. Nor can you split yourself from it. That wholeness holds you in every moment of your life. That is our reality.

But if you can't escape wholeness, you *can* desensitize yourself to it. We dull ourselves by holding patterns of tension in the flesh. To my mind, any energy or tension that is held in the body is a form of resistance to the present. It's a barrier, like surface tension. Which also means it's a form of resistance

to wholeness—to the very reality of the world.

And that's the basis of our whole-blindness. The ability to sense wholeness requires wholeness. A cracked bell doesn't ring. In the fractured state we consider normal we are unable to feel wholeness. And that shows up in our lives. We struggle to feel the wholeness of the body, or of the self. We have largely forgotten what it means to speak from the wholeness of our being. We struggle to feel the present as a whole. And if you can't feel the wholeness of the present, you aren't feeling the present, because it exists only in wholeness.

So our culture is characteristically whole-blind—our embodied intelligence has been systematically desensitized to the reality in which we live.

**McKee:** I heard you say once, “Independence isn't a real quality in the world.” It took me back a bit, and I still grapple with it. I'm wondering if you could share more.

**Shepherd:** Well, I can understand that reaction, because our culture is dedicated to the idea of independence. But you can't point to a single example of independence anywhere in the universe. It doesn't exist. Everything leans on everything. Everything depends on everything. Everything influences everything at so subtle a level that we can't even imagine it. For instance, it's been demonstrated mathematically that the gravity of an electron at the outermost fringe of the universe affects the movement of the molecules of air in the room we're sitting in at the moment, and the formation of clouds drifting overhead. We live in a field of felt relationships in which everything feels everything. Independence is a fantasy.

More specifically, independence is the fantasy that drives the mythological tyrant. Joseph Campbell actually characterized the tyrant as “the man of self-achieved independence.” Now to our ears that phrase, “self-achieved independence” sounds pretty good! Could you come up with a better descriptor of the American dream? But it's a figment; it's a fantasy. Unfortunately it's a fantasy around which our whole culture has gathered and around which each of us in turn has been shaped.

Like the tyrant, we yearn to be independent as a way of fortifying ourselves against the vagaries of the world. Our typical image of success is represented by the self-made billionaire in his mansion on the hill, secure within its perimeter fence, needing nothing from the outside world: swimming pool, chef, cinema, he has it all. Self-achieved independence! Alternatively, success could be represented by a life lived in a small community in which doors aren't locked and you pretty much know everyone, and people look out for each other, and they come together to celebrate and grieve and pitch in. Some cultures measure wealth in terms of such relationships.

But that's not what our culture yearns for. We want independence, and the safety it promises. Now I've personally observed that there's no such thing as safety in this world. If you're alive, you're not safe. If you're alive, you're going to die; you are going to be hurt. There is, of course, security, the security of being, which no one can deprive you of. But we want to make ourselves safe. I think people generally understand that if you're alive you're not safe—but then they draw a corollary from it that

says, “Well then, maybe if I’m less alive, I’ll be more safe.” So you see people compromising themselves, making themselves smaller, binding their aliveness with cautionary, inner barriers. They are diminishing not just their experience of life, but their capacity for entering an exchange of gifts with the world around them.

**McKee:** In your book *Radical Wholeness*, you talk about being limited by our five senses: “the big five,” you call them. We know what those five senses are, but how are we limited by them and what senses are we missing?

**Shepherd:** The five senses are a cultural construct—and as a model of understanding they just happen to impair our experience of embodiment. It seems obvious to us that we have five senses, but when you look at other cultures you find that some have a completely different sensorium. For example, the Anlo-Ewe in Africa don’t even have a word for the senses as we do. What they have is the term, “seselelame.” Seselelame literally translates as “feel-feel-at-flesh-inside.”

In her book *Culture and the Senses*, Kathryn Linn Geurts itemizes approximately nine senses that the Anlo-Ewe recognize. For example, balance is their primary sense. And you might think, “Well that’s strange,” because in English we talk about a ‘sense’ of balance. We actually have a sense organ in the inner ear devoted to balance. Why don’t we include it as a sense? The answer to that becomes clear when you look at what the big five have in common: they all impute a boundary that separates us from the world.

For example, light crosses the boundary of the self, lands on the retina and is sent to the brain for interpretation. Smell, taste, hearing—they all conform to the same model: a stimulus from the outside world crosses the boundary of the self and lands on a receptor. So the senses we validate all uphold this idea that we are separate from the world, independent from it—contained within a boundary that helps us feel safe. The way we imagine and experience our senses, then, actually divides us from the world.

Balance doesn’t conform to that model. The earth’s gravity isn’t a stimulus crossing a boundary—it’s a felt relationship you’ve been held in since the moment you were conceived. We are utterly permeable to it. But our culture is deeply devoted to the fantasies of separation, independence and control. So we discount balance as a sense.

**McKee:** You said that our model of the senses impairs embodiment. Can you clarify that?

**Shepherd:** Our model instructs us to look at the world from inside our heads, as though it were a movie, or we were watching it through a windshield. It’s ‘out there’. The Anlo-Ewe have a very different relationship with the world. Anthropologists have described them as having a “radical indeterminacy of the self.” To us that might sound like a state of madness. But they are porous to the world—they see the sights of the world ‘out there’, but they feel those sights ‘in here’, in the body’s spaciousness. Similarly they feel the sounds of the world in the body’s spaciousness. They have a word, for example, that means “hearing with the ear”—but they distinguish between that and *real* hearing.

When I feel most deeply embodied, my body feels like a resonator—like a bell—ringing to the present as a felt whole. I feel every sight and sound, every current of the world, etching through the spaciousness of my being. It lives there and resonates there. If you baffle that spaciousness with tension, the present will remain “out there” while you are “in here,” separate from it. And that’s the experience our model of the senses upholds. Rather than feel-feel-at-flesh-inside we have been taught to think-think-at-head-inside.

**McKee:** It’s odd to think that a human sense isn’t the same across all humanity. That the experience of seeing, for instance, can be different for different cultures.

**Shepherd:** Radically so. Another example of that is speech, which the Anlo-Ewe consider to be a sense, like hearing or sight. And that sounds nonsensical to us. When you speak, you are delivering your ideas to another person. And a sense goes the other way—it receives information from the outside. So how could speech be a sense? But our model is flawed.

When you begin speaking, you don’t usually know what the last word of your sentence is going to be. The words you speak are showing you the way in real time, as though each were a stepping-stone leading to the next. Speaking is a means of discovery. Your words help you feel your way forward, in the same way that the touch of your hand can help you find your way into a dark room. When you imagine that speaking is strictly a means of delivery, as our culture does, your focus while speaking will be on presenting your ideas rather than feeling and discovering. And that moves you out of the present and into what I call “presentation mode.”

**McKee:** You do some interesting exercises around this in your workshops. I think about the mirroring exercise, where one person faces you in the lunge position and you have them recite a text they know by heart. Holding a deep lunge stresses the person, and you invite them to use that stress to break out of presentation mode. It wasn’t easy for people, but they all got there. And what that sounded like! When they were finally liberated from presenting, it was like a totally different beast: both the person him or herself and the words they were animating. The words had a totally different quality.

**Shepherd:** Yes, everything changes when our thinking and being come together. And that’s the purpose of that exercise, to help people experience that unity. When someone begins that exercise, the energy of their speaking tends to be protected or disconnected from energy of their body. The intelligence in the head knows just what the words mean and how to deliver them, and needs nothing from the intelligence of the body. That’s how we learn to speak in our culture—in presentation mode. It’s almost an alien experience for most of us, to remain fully present as you speak, so that the whole of your being is heard through every word.

The lessons of presentation mode begin very, very early in our lives. When we are mere infants, it’s communicated to us in one way or another that the whole of our being is unacceptable. We’re too noisy, too fussy, too messy. There’s nothing very young children crave more than to be seen, to be unconditionally accepted, to be loved. It’s the very nourishment that calls them into being—and so



they learn to present themselves in a way that will win approval. They move out of wholeness into supervision—cloaking certain parts of themselves and hoisting others into the foreground.

And just to be clear, the purpose of presentation mode is to manipulate a certain response in the person you're speaking to. You're hoping they'll agree with what you're saying, you're hoping they'll like you perhaps. Maybe you're assuring them that you're a nice person. All of these things are sub-text. But what is readily apparent is the way presentation mode focuses our attention on delivery and sacrifices our wholeness.

So in that mirroring exercise the participant is in a lunge position, as you said—and I'm facing them, doing the same. The longer we hold that position, the more energized the legs become. As that energy ramps up, it pushes against the habits that keep it from interfering with our thinking. At a certain point the container fails, the words escape their predetermined cadence and control, they dissolve into the energy of the life of the moment, and arise reborn.

**McKee:** I remember you said to one of the persons in the exercise, “That energy that you found there, that's a strength that's always available to you.”

**Shepherd:** It was a woman. As most of us tend to do, she began in presentation mode—unconsciously using her face to help me understand her words. I remember her eyebrows animated, reaching for affirmation. What I said was, and it's a very strange instruction, “allow your face to tilt back into the body and let it float down through the body and come to rest on the pelvic bowl so that you have no face but that one”—because in presentation mode the face tends to go it alone, disconnected from being. I could see her moving through what I'd suggested and something in her shook as it happened, surrendering to the life that was there. What awoke within her was a privilege to witness.

**McKee:** Some of the people who did it were women, and one was a man. In general what I noticed was that the man, when he got to that core power underneath, he found a real tenderness there; a real softness. In contrast, the women seemed to find a strength and a fire. I took note that in this current climate we're in, both of these are necessary.

**Shepherd:** Yes.

**McKee:** The man actually had to “de-fire” a little bit. He had oration and potency as part of his pose.

**Shepherd:** Presenting, yes. The exercise helps people ditch the pose and welcome life just as it is. It's very stereotypical, but women are taught to be nice and men are taught to be strong, whatever that is. I've had women tell me with gratitude that they discovered their voice in that exercise in a way they had never experienced before. Once someone has been through something like that, once that door has been opened, it's never the same again.

**McKee:** I wonder if people who are considered “eloquent” are actually the ones who are most letting the words come from their whole body. Maybe eloquence is less about the picking the right words

and more about being embodied.

**Shepherd:** I think what we primarily hear in a really engaging speaker is their presence. Less engaging speakers make a commitment, conscious or otherwise, to “sounding good” or “sounding interesting”—and that requires a top-down supervision that is incompatible with presence.

**McKee:** I'd like to ask you about the four dimensions—the “chosen four” as you call them—and how confining the dimensions like that limits us. What dimensions are we missing?

**Shepherd:** The four dimensions are the three of space and the one of time that Einstein brought into the fold. Every one of those dimensions enables us to specify the distance between things. I'm two feet from you, that was three days ago. We've glommed on to those as a framework that promises to contain reality, but reality keeps leaking out of it—because there is another dimension in which everything is in contact with everything else at all times. In a very real sense, even when there is space between things, there is also no space between them. Entanglement is one manifestation of that, where two particles light-years apart can instantaneously affect each other. But everyone also has examples from their life of a similar thing—perhaps an intuitive premonition. The kind of knowing Robert Wolff experienced with the Sn'goi. The kind of knowing through which our ancestors attuned to their world in order to survive.

A *National Geographic* photographer, Loren McIntyre, coined the term space/time/mind continuum to name that missing dimension. It was something he experienced personally. He was on a mission in the Amazon basin to photograph the elusive Mayoruna people. They are called the “cat people” because they pierce their cheeks and put whiskers in to resemble cats. A plane dropped him off and he made camp for the night. The next morning while he was organizing his stuff, he looked up and saw four Mayoruna tribesmen on the riverbank. It was an incredible stroke of luck. He was so excited that he started taking their photographs and followed them into the jungle. Deep into the jungle. Hours later, way past any point at which he could find his way back, they arrived in their village. No one there spoke English or Portuguese or any other language McIntyre knew. He was stranded in a primitive settlement with nowhere else to go. Some of the tribe resented his presence and at one point he was almost murdered. In the aftermath of that, sitting in the village, he heard an elder silently say to him, “Some of us are friends.” From that moment he and the elder continued to share thoughts without the benefit of speech. I mean, without even knowing the other's language. He later learned that the Mayoruna referred to that silent thought-sharing as “the ancient way of speaking.”

Similarly, some Australian aborigines use smoke signals—not to send messages in code, but to tell someone, maybe 20 miles away, “We need to talk.” The person seeing the smoke would sit down and the person by the fire would sit down and they would communicate. The dimension that brings them together in that way is as real as gravity. And we refuse to acknowledge it as real for the same reason we don't accept balance—our sensitivity to gravity—as a real sense: that fifth dimension places us in a field of felt relationship—and that violates the basic requirement of our culture that insists each of us be held in a separate, personal boundary, safe from wholeness.



**McKee:** For all our civilized advances, you have to wonder what we've lost.

**Shepherd:** We've been blind-sided by our top-down approach. If the body is a bell, resonating to the world around it, it's as though we have stuffed the bell full of cotton balls that stifle its ringing. The present is whispering to us, "Come and play, come and risk," whatever it may be. But we don't notice. We don't feel the present in that way. We don't feel its *presence*. We feel it as a collection of things. And as for retiring our self-consciousness and allowing our relationship with the present to be primary rather than the one with the self—that sort of partnership is almost unavailable to us as a culture.

The path to embodiment, if we choose it, means finding those cotton balls in the body—those barriers that dull us to the world—and releasing them and releasing them and integrating them, so that we can once again resonate to the present and find guidance there. If you cannot feel that guidance, all you can do is go it alone; all you can do is guide yourself. And however clever your rational mind may be at supervising you, it will be pitifully inadequate to the task of assessing the world and finding your way through it in a state of grace.

**McKee:** I heard you say at the workshop, "Presence isn't something that can be achieved. It's not a static image." That challenged me a bit because I think I have endeavored to find presence as though when I get it, it's some sort of quality that I then have. You're asking to think of it differently.

**Shepherd:** Our sense of being independent encourages us to believe that presence can be achieved and possessed. We think of wholeness in the same way: "Be whole in body, mind, and spirit" as the saying goes, as though your wholeness were not contingent on the whole to which you seamlessly belong, but were rather a quality into which you organize yourself. Similarly, we believe that self-knowledge is something we achieve as we reach deep down inside ourselves and discover our truth there. None of that seems tenable to me.

We discover who we are by coming into felt relationship with the world around us. You can come into felt relationship with a leaf drifting from a tree, with a child playing with a chalk on the sidewalk, with a strain of music. As you come into felt relationship with each of those, *who you are* is illuminated in a particular way. The more deeply you come into felt relationship with the world, the more deeply you discover who you are—not as a fixed, known entity but as a responsive presence illuminated by the world.

We similarly think of presence as a quality on its own rather than one of relationship. We speak of the importance of "being present"—as though it were a static quality. Again, I don't believe presence can be derived except through relationship. It needs a preposition. So I can be present *to* my friend, or *to* the sounds of the world around me, or *to* the moment as a felt whole. Presence is gifted to me by the world. The more receptive I am to the world, the more present I am. And I feel that receptivity very specifically within my body as a spaciousness that makes room for the world to live in me and through me. It's in the realm of feel-feel-at-flesh-inside that self and world meet as one.

**McKee:** It's almost like presence then is not the end but actually just the beginning, because if you

are really present and in relationship with the moment—with the person beside you, with the tree you walked by—who knows what you're going to learn about yourself, what your journey is going to be with that. I guess it doesn't even really start then until the presence starts.

**Shepherd:** Exactly. So then the most personal, most crucial journey we each make is the journey of surrender that opens us to receiving the gift of presence from the world around us. And as you say, who knows how the world will touch you as you allow it to pass through you and live within you? If you do know how that's going to happen, then you are holding on to an idea of who you know yourself to be. That's the either/or choice we face: you can be who you know yourself to be or you can be present. Not both.

**McKee:** It seems so easy to get complacent in this. Like, I've grown enough. I'm more comfortable now in my skin. Do I really need to keep stretching? It seems vigilance is key.

**Shepherd:** Yes, and the most mindful part of that vigilance is around surrender. You can't achieve presence, you can't achieve wholeness—you are inescapably whole, so how could you *achieve* it? In that way wholeness is unlike other ideals we might choose to live by, such as compassion, honesty, peace of heart or gratitude, because we *can* achieve those. You know how compassion feels, you know what it looks like, and you can choose to be compassionate in a given situation. But that choice risks putting you in a divided state—one part of you knows what should happen and takes charge of the other parts of you to make it happen.

Wholeness is different. It's the inescapable nature of our reality. Nothing to achieve. All you can do is surrender to it. And as you say, who knows where that might take you? A surrender to the reality of the present is a surrender to newness itself. One thing I have noticed, though, is that when I do surrender to wholeness I can be no other than compassionate; I have peace of heart; I live in gratitude. All those other ideals fall into place naturally. And of course vigilance is needed because the surrendering never ends. Wholeness isn't a destination you arrive at. You don't wake up one day and say, "Finally I'm whole! What next on my agenda?" It's a continuous, physical process of undoing—of releasing the shadows of neglect in the body, the divisions, the cotton balls. Of settling into a place where you can make room for the present and resonate to it without expectation.

But there are so many ways of contracting and disconnecting! Our entire lives are shaped by a tug-of-war between two competing desires within us: the desire to remember and the desire to forget. The desire to remember is the more difficult route, but it's also what we truly crave. I think we yearn to connect with reality and grow into our gifts. That's what feeds our lives. Our forgetfulness can feel like a cloak of neglect that falls over our bodies and begins to feel comfortable, drawing us into a sense of dulled, isolated privilege.

**McKee:** It seems that a lot of your work is to, on a physical level, fall into that space of remembering that resides in the pelvic bowl. I'm wondering why you focus on that region of the body so much.

**Shepherd:** The reason is experiential rather than scientific. A lot of our culture wants to shape expe-

rience according to our ideas of how it should be. I tend to go the other way. I honor the experience and then I'll try to make sense of it later.

When I was a teenager I studied classical Japanese *Noh* theater: a 600-year-old form of theater that to my mind is a consummate art. That's where I experienced the power of the pelvic bowl for the first time. The Japanese culture speaks of *Hara*, which translates literally as "belly." They honor the belly as a region of faultless intelligence and as the source of their profoundest truth. When an accomplished actor performs *Noh*, every movement of the arm accords with that intelligence, every turn of the head is initiated there, the actor sees from that place—and the effect is extraordinary.

I watched hours and hours of *Noh* theater. And it seeped into my being. I experienced the stirring of an intelligence within me that is connected to wholeness, that comes into felt relationship, and that is capable of integrating *anything*. It took me years to learn to trust it and understand it and grow into it. But living in accord with it is so different from the pursuits we commit to when we live in our heads: grasping, analyzing, scheming, narrating, planning, rehashing, and second-guessing. We may despair at our fragmented lives, and yearn for the qualities of grace, harmony and presence that belong to wholeness. But we're striving to achieve wholeness with an intelligence that specializes in perspective and analysis.

Perspective requires separation—some sort of distance. Analysis requires the separation of a whole into its component parts. Those qualities, marvelous as they are, are incapable of attuning to wholeness. The surrender that presence requires, that wholeness requires, is a physical experience: your body softens, and your center of awareness descends until it comes to rest on the pelvic floor, and then dilates into the world—much as a water drop landing on a still pond initiates widening concentric circles that travel to the farthest shore.

**McKee:** And it seems that the moment you feel wholeness from the pelvic bowl, you are also joining it.

**Shepherd:** That's my experience. And yet that realm of the pelvic bowl has been cast into shame and neglect by our culture. I find it more than mere coincidence that our aversion to that realm—which I experience as the female realm of my consciousness—is mirrored in our cultural neglect of women. Thousands of years ago, people in Europe experienced their thinking in the pelvic bowl and their cultures were gathered around the mother. When people shifted from hunting and gathering to farming, that center of awareness began to rise through the body towards the head, and their allegiances began to shift from the mother to the father, from the earth to the sky, and from the goddess to the god. Today we have departed so far from that grounded intelligence in the pelvic bowl that we have difficulty even being aware of it. As for the experience of being aware of the world *from* the pelvic bowl—well, that seems truly alien to us. Impossible, even. But it's commonplace among other cultures.

**McKee:** "Being aware of" the pelvic bowl is still the same brain-centered approach, much like, "What's your gut saying?" or "What's your heart saying?" That's basically asking the brain, "Hold on a second. Go check in to those other spots. Get the information and then report back." As opposed to

“being aware from” these other places, which actually don't involve the head at all, frankly.

**Shepherd:** They certainly don't defer to the head's intelligence. The intelligence in the head operates by exclusion. It perceives by exclusion, it categorizes by exclusion, it discerns by exclusion, it systemizes by exclusion. But the intelligence in the pelvic bowl is inclusive. As your awareness descends to the pelvic bowl, comes to rest there and attunes to the world, it excludes nothing, not even the thinking of the head.

**McKee:** It seems that you're not necessarily trying to make argument about the pre-eminence of the pelvic bowl. You're just saying that our intelligence resides throughout our body.



**Shepherd:** Yes, and... There is a specific geography to the body's intelligence. For instance, I feel the pelvic floor as the ground of my being. When I allow the center of my awareness to rest there, there is a phase shift in my sensitivity to the world around me, as though it melts into wholeness. At the center of the pelvic floor is the perineum—a place of still, resonant knowing. Even in the midst of heightened activity, I find the stillness of that center is intact—attuning without effort, without division, without expectation. It becomes the gravitational center of my being and my thinking.

So yes to intelligence of the heart, yes to the intelligence of the shoulder blade, of the little finger—but the ground of my being is the pelvic floor. When I return to it, I come home to myself. It has a solidity to it, and a sense of fluid possibility. It's a little like that green layer of life on the Earth's surface that's rich with fecundity. That comparison might seem to leave the legs out of the picture, but I experience them as the roots of my being. They connect with the ground and reverberate to its presence. To extend the metaphor, the realm of the body above the pelvic bowl is like the sky. It can feel a little foggy. It might feel as though thunderheads are moving through it. There could even be an electric storm going on in your head. Or that whole realm can feel like a clear blue sky. When I

experience the unsullied spaciousness of a clear blue sky within me, that is when I'm most clearly attuned to the present, and most gracefully moved by it.

**McKee:** You're not a big fan of the phrase "raise your consciousness," and I wonder why not.

**Shepherd:** When you are addressing a culture that has been indoctrinated to live in their heads and you're saying to them, "Go higher, go higher"—I mean, how much more disconnected from the earth could we be? How fully do you want to leave the body? Do you want to escape it all together?

I have nothing against welcoming the energy of the sky but, my gosh, it better be counter-balanced by having your feet on the ground. We are becoming resolutely more and more abstract in our values, in our ways of being, in our ways of relating, in our experience of the self. I mean, our relationship with the cellphone is positively umbilical, titillating the abstractions of the head and shifting our awareness of the body and the present into dark neglect. So I'd say lower your consciousness! I think our desire to transcend imperils not just ourselves but the earth around us.

**McKee:** It could be a bumper sticker: Lower your consciousness! [laughter]

I see some interesting parallels between your work and this Italian scientist named Monica Gagliano, whom I've been doing some work with. She's a plant scientist and she's proven through various experiments that plants have the ability to learn and remember. She has basically proven that they have a Pavlovian response to stimuli. Her science in the experiments is rock solid. There's nothing fuzzy about her, but her assertions about plant intelligence have largely been dismissed until recently because the plants don't have a brain or neurons and so how could they be intelligent? She is saying back, "Oh, I don't know why or how they are. I just know they are. Maybe instead of fighting what I found, there might be something there for humans to take, in terms of what our own intelligence might look like. Perhaps our intelligence is more like the plants' intelligence, which is more diffuse and mysterious than residing in one specific place." As you've been talking about wisdom in the body, I'm really quite taken with this idea that maybe that's where we might be going, hopefully—really beginning to accept that our intelligence is more like plants. It's a bit of a stretch, but I see it connecting.

**Shepherd:** It feels like a stretch because of the way we experience our intelligence. But when my thinking and being reunite, every thought resonates as feeling through the whole of my being, and I recognize every feeling in my body as a form of thought. The unity of my intelligence feels like a field without limit. My whole life's experience is at odds with our definition of intelligence as abstract reasoning. And it's no accident that that particular definition was created by the intelligence in the head, which specializes in abstract reasoning. It's a somewhat flattering and self-serving viewpoint! [laughter]

**McKee:** We've extended the notion of intelligence to animals but not yet plants.

**Shepherd:** Not yet, and I completely agree with Gagliano's suggestion that we also misunderstand



the nature of our own intelligence. Abstract reasoning is a part of it, but I think it's just one wavelength within a massive spectrum. We need a more accurate definition. To my way of thinking, the foundation of our intelligence is sensitivity. You might have a sensitivity to a child's tears, to the smell of roses, to legal argument, to birdsong—there are innumerable sensitivities, and every one of them is a form of intelligence. But sensitivity is by nature reactive. If the retina didn't react to light it wouldn't see. And that reactivity has to be grounded to become coherent. And groundedness involves the body. I would say, then, that we could more accurately characterize our intelligence as a grounded sensitivity.

That definition sheds an unflattering light on our public education systems. They certainly promote abstract reasoning, but they directly violate a child's sensitivity, and have an institutional bias that undermines a child's sense of groundedness. If intelligence is a grounded sensitivity, schools are demonstrably corrosive to it.

**McKee:** And what about the question that Gagliano's research raises, whether intelligence is a local phenomenon, or something more diffuse?

**Shepherd:** There's extensive evidence that points to something more diffuse. In his book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben offers astonishing accounts of the ways in which trees communicate with each other and make collective decisions. One example really struck me: a beech forest can decide one year not to make any nuts, because the animals feeding on them have become too numerous and aren't leaving enough on the ground to become new trees. The forest may even extend that decision to the following year. The animals, with less to eat, diminish in number—and eventually the forest will decide it's time to make nuts again. The forest *en masse* exercises intelligence.

Slime molds are another example. A slime mold—something you might come across in the woods— isn't an organism; it is thousands of individual amoebae that gather in a visible clump. But studies have shown that the clump operates with an astonishing intelligence: it's able to solve mazes, select the most nutritious food from an assortment, and even measure time. You could dissect and scrutinize an individual amoeba to your heart's content, but you'll never find a local source of that intelligence within it.

Harvester ants present another puzzle. Deborah Gordon has studied them for decades, and her research has completely overturned our conventional understanding of how a colony operates. It turns out a colony is completely unmanaged—no ant, not even the queen, ever gives an order to another ant. Gordon uncovered some simple rules that govern ant behavior—but there's more going on than those rules. For instance, something can alter those rules over time, and something alters the behavior of the colony as it ages—even though the ants in the old colony are genetically identical to the ants in the young one. She describes one incident that falls way outside the scope of simple rules. She was observing a colony just before the seasonal monsoons were to begin, and some of the ants started building a little turret around the entrance to the colony. When the rains came, the turret held and the colony didn't flood. Now, these ants weren't alive the previous year when it rained: how did they know how to build a turret? They didn't, individually. They didn't even 'know' what a turret is. And



how were those turret builders selected from the colony? If all the ants congregated to build it, it would have been chaos; and if not enough came it wouldn't have been completed.

**McKee:** It seems that the intelligence being expressed is not merely diffuse—it may not even be material.

**Shepherd:** We want to locate the source of intelligence in a material interaction, but in these cases it can't be done. It doesn't reside in the material parts. It doesn't arise as an additive quality—little individual smarts adding up to create a larger overall intelligence. Intelligence is an emergent phenomenon. It emerges from the harmony of an organic unity. Invariably. And that unity can occur on any scale: a cell, a slime mold, an ant, a human, or a forest. Or even a planet. And like Russian dolls, each intelligence is guided by the larger intelligence within which it is nested.

Once we recognize that, we begin to see the implications for us of the ant, for example, which doesn't know what is guiding it to build a turret, isn't objectively aware of the source of that guidance in any way, but follows it infallibly—and as a result just happens to harmonize with the forces of the world around it. Now if an ant colony can attune to an emergent intelligence, surely to goodness the human being can.

But only, I believe, if we recover our grounded sensitivity, a quality that thinks hand-in-hand with the world. We have come to deny that partnership, secure in the knowledge that we are the cleverest culture that has ever lived. And we are right—but we have forgotten how to live intelligently.

**McKee:** Cleverness doesn't need the body, but intelligence does.

**Shepherd:** The body's intelligence attunes. On a cellular level it knows that it belongs to the world. It feels the whole of reality in its flesh. It's been estimated that the body is aware of a billion times more information than the conscious mind. A billion times! In one way all that information is hidden from us—we can't consciously know it. It is pre-conscious, or unconscious. But in another way it is all there to be felt—specifically and intimately, resonating to the present. We cannot live intelligently if we disconnect from that.

**McKee:** It seems that there's an increased awareness in Western culture about the ways we store and process trauma in our bodies. Are you heartened by this? Can you attribute it to anything? It seems like there's a literacy that's developing.

**Shepherd:** I do find it encouraging. I think trauma is primarily characterized by a dissociation from the body. By that standard our entire culture is traumatized. So it's a huge step for us to recognize that the body has intelligence. That the body remembers. That the body discerns. Sometimes, though, I feel that our awakening to the body's intelligence is limited by the way we want that intelligence to be siloed. We don't want it to be diffuse. We want it to be contained so we can work on it and sort it out. And certainly that focus can be helpful. It's a necessary beginning if we are to confront the body's shadows. But as long as we fixate on the self, we will remain in charge of organizing it. And then the

possibility for healing is limited. There's no question that unlocking the body from trauma is a crucial stage—but if the focus remains on the self, we will remain self-conscious, which is itself a wound. It's a wound that turns the self into a problem that needs supervision. In the meantime, the body's intelligence is nested within a larger harmony to which it will naturally attune. It's in that attunement that we truly heal into wholeness. Athletes describe that attunement as being in the zone; it's what carries artists in the midst of their creativity. But to find that attunement we need to relinquish our self-supervision and give ourselves over to the present, to be organized by its bottomless sensitivities.



Of course we resist that. We seem incapable of finding the world around us more interesting than our obsessive self-organizing. We seem unable to reconcile our fantasies about what the self is with the fact that it is inseparable from everything around it. We want to believe we are separate. But everything that exists is a process that is participant in every other process in the universe.

Take a tree as an example of that. A tree isn't a static thing that sits within its specified boundary. Like us, it's a process—changing and being changed with every passing moment. Once you understand the tree as a process, you might ask where the boundary of that process lies. Certainly the roots are part of the process of the tree, but you also have to recognize that the moisture around those roots keeping them alive is part of it too. The minerals in the soil into which the roots have grown are part of its process. The bacteria and fungi and bugs in that soil are part of its process. As is the mulch that leeches into the earth to nourish the soil. And the rain that falls is certainly part of the process of the tree. So then the mountains that pushed the rain out of the clouds are part of the process of the tree.

And the sun that lifts the water from the sea is part of the process of the tree. And the galaxy that holds the sun in place is part of the process of the tree. When you look for the boundary of the tree, you eventually end up searching for it at the outer fringes of the cosmos. The same is true of us. You could pretty much replace the word 'tree' with 'self.'

**McKee:** It feels so natural, though—to look around and see all the things in this room as essentially separate. And to feel myself as separate.

**Shepherd:** It does feel natural, because we have grown up in a culture that has unknowingly aligned itself with the aspirations of the mythological tyrant. Like the tyrant, our agenda of control imposes divisions on the world. And we similarly divide ourselves from the world, and feel safer within those divisions. But our dream of separation pulls us into ceaseless conflict with reality, and with nature.

If you look at what nature loves, you can see that conflict clearly. For instance, nature loves change—there's nothing that exists in nature that isn't changing. Everything is in flux. And nature loves diversity—it's not interested in making the same thing twice. It wants to play and spawn newness. It produces an endless abundance of differences. And finally nature loves service—there is nothing that is born that is not born into service. The earthworm burrowing in the dark earth; the shark in the ocean's depths; the snail sliding along the twig—they are all in service. The flight of a bird is an act of harmonizing with the world.

But when you long for the 'self-achieved independence' of the tyrant, then you'll resent change, because you've got an agenda and change messes with your plans, or upsets the status quo. Diversity is perceived as a threat. You fear it because sameness and conformity are predictable, and newness and the unknown aren't. And service? You serve only yourself. Again, that sounds completely natural to us: determine will benefit you personally and make your choices accordingly! If you achieve personal success, what else matters? But just like the bird on the branch, in every moment we are called into service—and we are called into the richest, most gratifying experiences of our lives as we answer that call.

**McKee:** It strikes me that if the increased awareness around somatics and trauma becomes just another arm of the self-help movement, we'll be missing out on the larger picture that exists outside of ourselves.

**Shepherd:** I think that's true. Most self-help initiatives say to you, "The ideas you are living by are mistaken. You need the true set of ideas. Switch to it and everything in your life will improve." Living in compliance with ideas traps us in a top-down, self-conscious way of organizing ourselves—the approach we have been trained to trust. And certainly there are times when being conscious of the self is crucially helpful—but our culture is stuck in that state, and is disabled by it. It generates an inner monologue of self-judgement, correction, narrative and flattery that drowns out the intimate whispering of the world—which is always calling you to wholeness, calling for your unique gifts to be offered in service. The chatter of our inner monologue also prevents us from becoming truly conscious, in the literal meaning of the word. Our word *conscious* comes from a Latin verb that means, "to

be mutually aware.” And that root meaning brings us back to Gagliano’s question: is consciousness a local phenomenon, or something more diffuse? What I know is that when I come into a mutual awareness with the present, that’s when I feel my own reality most clearly.

And I’ve thought a lot about what it means to feel reality, because what else is my life going to be grounded in? And I’ve come to understand that my experience of reality is my experience of the world passing through me. That’s something the world does all the time—whether it’s light passing into my eye or the exhalations of forests passing into my lungs as breath and becoming part of my cells, and moving out again to offer in exchange a gift to the trees. It happens as I bite into an apple and chew it, and its flesh and its juice become my flesh and blood. The apple becomes my eyelashes and capillaries. It becomes my energy as I run on the beach. And as the apple passes out of me it brings nourishment to the apple tree—or did until toilets were invented.

The world is continuously becoming me and I am continuously becoming the world, and as it passes through me it sustains my reality. But the world passes through me in less material ways as well. I look at a tree, and I can either just know it as a thing, or I can come into *felt* relationship with it, and in our mutual awareness, feel its energy moving through me and attuning me to myself in a whole different way. The same can happen as I meet a person.

**McKee:** It’s interesting how you seem to come at your work from an experiential and a bodily point of view, as opposed to anything overtly spiritual. Is that intentional?

**Shepherd:** I’ve personally been enriched and challenged and deepened by a range of spiritual practices—but yes, it’s a deliberate choice. It’s made with an awareness that any spiritual reference instantly evokes a whole realm of suppositions. I think the essence of any spiritual tradition is depleted as it’s hardened into dogma. If I am present to a stalk of grass with the whole of my being, it’s a spiritual experience. I don’t need a formal theology to explain that to me. I don’t even need language. Nor would I wish to impose a whole catalogue of suppositions on someone else by suggesting my spiritual experience should be theirs.

I think the nature of a spiritual experience is essentially the experience of a very big question. When I encounter the world directly, I make peace with my ignorance—the world in its wholeness is unknowable, and I can only feel it in its wholeness by feeling the mystery that makes it whole. When I feel that, I have the sense that I am experiencing a living question. Nature doesn’t deliver answers. You can’t locate a single answer anywhere in nature. Every plant is a question. Every bug on a twig is a question. Formalized spirituality gravitates towards answers. I want to feel the questions.

**McKee:** The physician and thinker Gabor Maté talks about the almost impossible conundrum that the western child faces. He said on the one hand, they’re born with an imperative to bring their gifts to the world. To live out their soul’s purpose. On the other hand, they are hardwired to seek attachment with their birth family, since their survival literally depends on that. So he went on to say that many families, due in part to their own social conditioning, ignore or even disparage the child’s gifts as they begin to manifest. Thus, the child learns to suppress or ignore these gifts in order to guaran-

tee their survival through the attachment. “What a loss,” he said. But he went on to challenge the audience: what would it look like both to give attachment *and* see the gifts of the people in our lives? Imagine if that’s who was running around the planet right now: people who hadn’t had to sacrifice their gifts in order to survive. He is issuing an invitation: to *not* do that to other people, and to not let that get done to us.

I imagine you have seen a lot of healing in your workshops. And you’ve seen what it looks like when people have those gifts seen and loved.

**Shepherd:** Maté is such an astute thinker. Yes, we are taught that the gifts of our wholeness are somehow unacceptable—but we need attachment, and that makes the denial of our wholeness necessary. That personal conundrum is complicated by our culture. We desperately underestimate its effect on us. Our culture—any culture—provides its members with a story of what it means to be human. But it’s just a story, and if we mistake that story of reality for reality itself, we run into trouble.

Our story tells us that being human means you are superior to the natural world. That you are alone. That your head should be in charge of your being. That you should out-think your problems. That your primary job is to control your life and your world to the best of your ability. The divisions enforced by that story live within our neurology and lock up our natural gifts. By blinding us to wholeness, the story sets us up to chase fantasies. But you are right that I’ve been privileged in my work to witness what happens when the body’s intelligence is shown another way—when it is allowed to soften into the world, and surrender to the inner spaciousness that opens heart and soul to the intimate embrace of the present. I think if we are to survive as a culture, if we are to thrive as individuals, we have to change who we know ourselves to be. And to change that story we need to come back to the body, and renew our relationship with its intelligence, and nurture the birth of a new story.

**McKee:** I think we should end there.

## About Philip Shepherd

Philip Shepherd lives in Toronto, Ontario. He is the co-founder of **The Embodied Present Process** (TEPP), author of *New Self, New World, Radical Wholeness* and *Deep Fitness*, and recognized as an international authority on embodiment.

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