

LIFE - David Spangler

The following is a compilation of two David's Desks, # 16 and #17. This was a two-part essay on the nature of life. It's a spiritual and shamanic look at what it means to say that everything is alive based on my own experiences.

When I was five or six years old, my parents and I went to see a movie that included a Walt Disney cartoon. In this animated short feature, the furniture and other objects were all alive and talked to the characters. I remember sitting in the dark watching this, thinking, "Someone's made a movie about *my* world." Not that in the world I experienced sofas and chairs got up and sang and danced as they did in the Disney cartoon (which, I must admit, would have been pretty cool) or carried on extended conversations with me, but they definitely had a presence, a sentient energy of which I was aware. And interaction between me and that sentiency was possible.

The idea that everything is alive has been part of the shamanic world view for millennia, and in more recent history can be found in some religious mystical traditions as well. The pervasiveness of life is something individuals in all cultures and times have experienced. Even in popular language and culture, we invest our things with personalities and talk about them as if they were alive. Modern science and psychology would say this is merely anthropomorphic projection on our part, but older wisdoms would see this differently. And now there are branches of complexity theory and the science of nonequilibrium thermodynamics that are broadening our definition of what is life beyond the boundaries of biology and organic chemistry.

My intent in this letter, though, is not to discuss theory but phenomenology. I want to share what I experience that leads me to see everything as alive.

As shamanic ideas have become more present in our culture, particularly among those who explore and practice alternative and nature-oriented spiritualities, and we have become more holistically and ecologically minded, the phrase "Everything is alive" is bandied about more commonly. But what exactly does it mean? What is this life that everything shares? A mystic might say that it's God's Life or "Universal Life," but just what does that mean when applied to metal and plastic or to the upholstery of my favorite sofa? No one, I think, would claim it's the same as the life that animates you and me, the birds outside my window, or the trees in which they are nesting.

Yet all my life I have experienced everything around me as alive. Or put another way, life to me is not just a biological or organic phenomenon. It is an energy manifestation that is organized and self-sustaining, an eddy or vortex within a larger flow of universal energy. What does this mean?

To explore this question, I'd like to share with you how I experience the presence of life within an inanimate object, something normally considered unliving. For this purpose I choose a sofa in my living room. As much as I am able to translate a supersensible or subtle experience into words, I shall describe this process phenomenologically, much as a naturalist might describe his experience of a new species of animal or plant.

What does it mean to say, this sofa is alive because the entire universe is alive? Why and how is a piece of furniture alive to me? What does this mean? What are the implications of such life?

The first thing I see when I look at my sofa is what anyone would see: its surface appearance. It's a tad over seven feet in length, just perfect for lying down on to watch television (assuming I get to it before one of my kids does!). It's made of wood and cloth and a thick padding, with equally thick, soft cushions. It's red in color with alternating strips of gold and green against a background pattern of leaves and vines. It's lovely to look at and very comfortable. And at this level of perception, it's very ordinary and not at all "living" in any normal sense of that word.

If I shift my awareness to a deeper level, the sofa becomes something more. At the simplest level "inward," I am aware of an energy field surrounding it. All things are surrounded by this aura of energy. This field is "sticky" and can accumulate other forms of energy, such as those generated by our thoughts and emotions but also by our spiritual attunements. For example, if I'm content and peaceful when I sit or lie upon the sofa, the vibration of that peace can enter this energy field and stick there; likewise, if I'm agitated and upset, those emotional energies can be caught. It's as if there's a layer of psychic Velcro around the sofa that catches and holds energetic "lint" from the mental, emotional, and spiritual activity in the environment.

If certain of these psychic energies are repeated over and over, they can become deeply impressed upon the energy field of the sofa, going more deeply into its energetic substance than just this surface "Velcro" layer I'm describing. But otherwise, this energy "lint" is lightly held and can easily be removed through some practice of energy hygiene or cleansing. Just doing one's housework with love and in a cheerful manner—especially with the vibration of music—while visualizing clean, clear, vital energy sweeping through the room and the furniture can usually wipe such stuff away.

Feeling this energy can give a psychic or energetic impression of life, but it's really the life energy of others "recorded" on the subtle substance of the sofa. At this simple level, the sofa is energetically active, as most things are, but this is not the same as being alive. To discover how the sofa itself is alive, I must go deeper.

As I shift my awareness to do this, it's possible I may "overshoot" the mark and find myself slipping into a mystical state in which I become aware of a Presence and Life that is not just within the sofa but within all things. This is the primal Life from which all creation is emerging, what I think of as the level of the Sacred. This Life is a universal condition. It's the Life we all share, the Life of the Cosmos, the Life of the One, however we may understand that.

At this level, the sofa is most definitely alive, but it's no longer a sofa. It's part of a universal oneness flowing through all things, underlying the manifestation of all things. I might as well say the Cosmos is alive and leave it at that.

In astronomy, there's a concept called *the habitable zone* which is the distance from a star at which a planet could have conditions favorable to the existence and evolution of life such as we know it. How large this zone is and where it is found in a solar system depends on the nature and characteristics of that system's star. (Astronomers sometimes call this the "Goldilocks Zone" because it's neither too hot nor too cold but "just right.")

In a similar way, when I look for the life within the sofa, if I don't look far enough, I remain at the level of surface appearance or at the level of its aura with its accumulation of energy. If I look too far or go too deep, I enter a realm of Life that is vast, cosmic, and all-pervading, the Life of the One.

So what I seek is the "Goldilocks Zone of Life," and I find it in the way in which the universal flow of life becomes organized around specific "attractors" to form patterns, systems, and vortices of energy that are persistent and self-sustaining to some degree. To me, these are all *incarnational* systems. They don't just accumulate energy or substance; they organize it in some persistent manner; they are *autopoietic* or self-producing. They possess some level of coherency and integration. In my terminology, they possess *identity* and they also have a boundary of some nature that separates them from the rest of the energy flowing around them.

Imagine a river. As it flows, a branch lies across the river bank and into the water, and where it dips into the river, it impedes or restrains that flow to some degree. The water becomes turbulent in the area around the branch; an eddy may form. This eddy is a shape, a presence that persists even though water flows through it as long as the branch is there forming a boundary to catch that flow.

In a way, life is like that eddy, a complex organization of flowing energy in and around a boundary condition that defines its particularity and enables a system of organization to develop and persist.

So as I examine my sofa with a deeper perception, I come to an energy phenomenon that is not a universal presence or force and not just an accumulation of characteristics and energies from outside itself but that has its own particular unique, internally coherent and integrated organization. This is where I experience the sofa as something living, not in a biological way but in an energetic way.

What is this life like as I perceive it?

To use the metaphor of the river again, the branch that created the eddy of energetic organization and life in this instance is the human intent and imagination that created the sofa. In the first instance, it's the idea of "sofa" itself which has a long lineage back to the original idea of a couch or bed; that's at the stem of this branch. But the specific twigs and leaves of the branch that are hanging into the flow of universal substance and creating the boundary that forms the eddy are the specific idea and design for this particular kind of sofa.

This creative intent forms the "attractor" around which energy begins to organize and pattern itself. It is the initial identity that combines with a boundary to form the incarnation of this sofa. This incarnation is not entirely the work of the designer who initially fashioned the sofa. He or she created the physical pattern—what the sofa looks like and what it's designed to do—but this is the branch dangling into the flow of the river which creates the boundaries around which the energy organization forms. The "eddy" or energy pattern itself that forms from this "branch" is different. The two are related but they are not identical.

The energy pattern of the sofa at this "Goldilocks" level doesn't look to me like a sofa at all. In fact it doesn't "look" like anything in particular in the way that we are accustomed to physical objects having forms; rather it is a "consciousness shape" that reflects the complexity and patterning of the energy organization itself. Its shape reflects its capacities and potentials of consciousness. I don't know how to describe this in a

physical way; what, after all, is the “shape” of a mathematical equation or of a musical melody?

When I experience this “shape” of organized energy that is my sofa, it is not terribly complex or flexible; it cannot take much initiative, for instance (and none at all on a physical level). A human being, by comparison, is immensely more complex, organized, and capable as an energy form.

To use a different metaphor entirely, toy action figures are classified by “points of articulation,” that is, the joints that they possess, which determines where they can bend and how flexible they are. As a kid I had a set of rubber toy soldiers that were each molded as a single piece. They had no points of articulation and could not bend at all. Then there developed toy soldiers that had one point of articulation; they could bend at the waist. Later toy manufacturers made figures that could turn their heads or move their hands or feet, their elbows or knees. They had more points of articulation, more joints, and the more they had, the more they could be posed in the various positions that a real person could take. You didn’t have to imagine that your toy soldier was kneeling or bending or sitting; he really could kneel, bend, or sit.

Human beings energetically have an immense number of “points of articulation” or “joints of sentience;” these are the many ways our consciousnesses can “bend” and configure to the environment, take initiative, create, and so on. My sofa has only a few joints of sentience, and thus it is much more limited as an energy being than I am in what it can perceive and do. Yet it is not totally unaware or inanimate at this energetic level.

The crucial point is that this substance or flow that I’ve been calling “energy” (largely for want of a better word) which forms these subtle inner organizations of being—the “river” in my metaphor of the branch and the eddy—is itself sentient. Or put another way, everything that we experience or mean when we use words like *sentience*, *life*, *consciousness*, *mind*, *awareness*, and so forth reflects a characteristic of this more basic substance, which I usually just call Sacred energy or Sacred presence. As a consequence, any organization, pattern, or system emerging (I would say “incarnating”) from this basic, fundamental substance is going to possess qualities of awareness and life, configured and expressive in a way unique to its organizational shape, it’s “shape of consciousness.”

So I discover that at a “Goldilocks” level of energy and awareness a structure of sentience exists in my sofa that is aware and alive, not in the way that I am or that any organic, biological being would be but in a way that is perfectly useful and appropriate to the sentient energy from which it emerges—an emergence set into motion in this instance, though not entirely shaped by, human intervention through imagination and creative intent. It is this organization of sentience that I experienced as a child and felt as the life within the furniture and other objects that made up my world, so charmingly and whimsically portrayed in the Disney cartoon.

The presence of this life has real consequences to all of us and to our work as spiritual beings. That is what we’ll explore in my next David’s Desk.

LIFE (Part 2)

In my last David’s Desk, I talked the phenomenon of life and why from my perspective I might say that everything is alive. I shared my perception of how life and

sentientcy manifest in and around inanimate objects, using my sofa as an example. I spoke of different layers of organization and energy surrounding the sofa (as they surround all things) beginning with a simple “psychic-lint-catching” energy field that is not living or organized in itself but which catches the energetic and psychic debris that falls, like dandruff, from our normal activities, thoughts, and feelings. This psychic detritus can collect like dust under a bed or dirt in the cracks of the upholstery, and a person with psychic sensitivity can tune into it and tell you something about the people from whom it has come. Much of it can be removed in the ordinary process of cleaning the room, but there are energy hygiene measures that can ensure its removal.

At the other extreme from this simple energy field is the deep layer of life and presence that I think of as the Sacred, literally the Ground of All Being. To touch into this layer is to touch into the oneness that unites all things, the One Life that pervades creation.

Somewhere in between these two layers, however, something else can form, an organization of energy that is not a universal presence or force and not just an accumulation of “psychic lint.” It is what I think of as an “incarnation.” It embodies an intentionality and an identity, however simple they might be; it possesses boundaries that define it and distinguish it from its environment; it connects and engages with its environment in interactive ways; and from this process, a self-sustaining pattern of energy emerges with sufficient integrity, coherency and complexity to hold sentientcy. I experience this organization of energy as living. It exists in the realms of energy, consciousness and spirit with a capacity for some degree of awareness, response, and evolution.

It may be very simple life, and the life around my sofa certainly is, but it is still life. It is a presence of sentientcy.

So what does this mean?

Well, what it doesn’t mean is that my sofa is suddenly going to get up and cavort around the room. I’m not going to come out one morning and discover that the sofa and my easy chair have been having a relationship and are now the proud parents of twin footrests. We’re not talking biology here.

To clarify what we are talking about, let me define life a little further. I would define life as an organization of energy that allows sentientcy and consciousness to develop, express, and evolve. We think of consciousness as emerging from life (and exclusively biological life at that, which frankly is just a form of “biochauvinism”), but spiritual perception suggests just the opposite, that life emerges from consciousness and sentientcy. What we call “consciousness” in our everyday lives is probably just a faint manifestation of the primal generative mystery at the root of creation that mystics and others call “consciousness,” but that’s the topic for a whole other essay.

I think of life as a dynamic organization of energy of sufficient complexity, coherency, integrity, flow, and interaction with its environment that sentientcy can manifest and through it consciousness can evolve.

When I look around me at the things in my world and say, “Everything is alive,” what I’m really saying is that everything is consciousness in a process of evolution. Just as evolutionary biologists look at a human being and say, “Millions of years ago, you were just a single cell swimming in a primeval sea,” so I might look at myself and think, “Millions of years ago, my consciousness was a sofa in an alien’s living room circling

Epsilon Beta IV in the Gamma Quadrant!” And who knows what far future David Spangler may be starting his evolution of consciousness as my easy chair right now?

This is fanciful, of course, but my main point is not. We all participate in a universe of consciousness that is evolving all the time, from the dimmest flickering of sentiency existing in a dream state that is not even self-aware to the fabulously and unimaginably complex and radiant cosmic Beings whose lives embrace entire galaxies. And what we do affects that evolution, at least in the environment around us.

I have encountered in my inner work Beings in comparison to whom my consciousness is not much more evolved than the sentiency I find in my sofa. Their response to me is always loving, caring, considerate, and appropriate. They are like shepherds of consciousness, tending its evolution across vast expanses of life and energy. The light of my sentiency is like a shadow compared to theirs, yet they tend to it, as they do to millions and billions of other lives and consciousnesses within the field of their beings, as if it were the brightest, most valuable flame in creation.

This is the true implication of saying that everything is alive. We are each caretakers for the consciousnesses evolving around us, particularly those of lesser complexity and capacity than our own. When it gets down to it, I really am my sofa’s keeper!

To illustrate what I mean by this, let me continue with the exploration I started last time.

When I tune in to that level of energetic organization in and around my sofa capable of holding a flame of sentiency—the level of organization that I perceive as the life within the sofa—I’m aware of a presence. It’s not very complex or aware. A single cell has more awareness than this presence. But when I direct my attention to it and send love to it, I’m aware that it responds. It’s like blowing upon a coal which then brightens and flares up with heat and light. It soaks the love up and the energy shifts within its organization. It becomes a little more active, a little more complex. In a sense it “speeds up.” If I do this overtime as a regular practice, the energy life within the sofa becomes more aware, more active in its own sphere of being. It is able to participate more in the energy life around it. This simple sentiency evolves and becomes more responsive.

In effect, my energy, my consciousness, my attention shapes the energy environment and organization of this simple level of life. I can through my love and awareness heighten its evolution or I can through more negative emotions dampen it. And when I heighten and foster it through my love, I discover that this life becomes more aware and can send love and energy back. This can be very practical. By loving the things in my environment, I awaken the life within them to be loving to me in return. In a real way, I am teaching them about love and how to love, not in any philosophical way but through a form of stimulus and response.

As the life in my things is exposed to the complex vibrations of the love a human being such as myself can offer, it grows in its capacity to respond. To the extent it is able given its energetic organization and awareness, this life and consciousness can send energy and love back to me. I’m not talking about the depth or complexity of energy and love that a plant, an animal, or a human could offer me, but it’s still love, however simple it may be, and that counts for something. It can become a meaningful part of my everyday life, a nourishing part of my energy environment.

Even though the level of consciousness in most of our things is very basic and its light only a small spark, if human creativity, will, effort, and love have gone into its creation, then the item may have a more evolved energy organization and thus more life and consciousness than normal. It's one of the energetic qualities that distinguishes hand-made items and fine art from machine-made copies or items that are mass-produced. We can feel this, even if we're not sure what we're sensing.

If the organization of energy and life becomes complex enough, another phenomenon may occur. The object may become a point of contact—a kind of partial incarnation—for a non-physical entity which itself may be significantly more advanced and aware. If this were to happen to my sofa, then when I tuned into it, I might find myself in contact with a spiritual being that would be quite capable of engaging and communicating with me. This being would in effect be a “rider” on the energy of the sofa.

When my first child was about five or so, we took a trip to Disneyland where I bought him a stuffed animal. It was Bumblelion, a creature that was part bumblebee and part lion, the star of a popular Disney cartoon series on television at the time. It was so whimsical and cute, I couldn't resist it, and John-Michael fell in love with it. It went everywhere with him; he slept with it, he ate with it, he played with it.

One day I was holding Bumblelion and became aware of a presence around it. As it turned out, it was a kind of playful spirit that was also partly a protector. It was one of a class of beings—I suppose one could think of them as angels of a sort—that regularly associate with children. This one had attached itself to the energy of Bumblelion. Johnny had poured so much love into this stuffed animal that its own energy organization had become complex enough, heightened enough, that this inner being could see it and connect to it. It was using this stuffed toy as a point of physical connection to our world through which its own loving and protective energies could flow.

After that, when I would buy a stuffed animal for one of my children or for the children of friends, I would make a point of energizing the toy with love and then reaching out to one of these beings to invite it to connect with that energy and make that toy a point of contact to better bless the child who would be using it. Stuffed talismans!

Beings of this nature form such associations with our things in order to have closer contact with human energies. They “ride” a layer of energy within the object that enables them to make and sustain a connection. They are evolving, too, and are also benefitted by our loving awareness. And their response can definitely help us in the evolution of our consciousnesses as well.

Being aware of the secret life of things—that, as a friend of mine says, every *something* is really a *someone*—makes me aware of how much of a community we all are part of. But I don't have to have that awareness in order to bless my environment with my love. I can be totally unaware of any level of life and consciousness within my sofa or any other piece of furniture and still give it love, and that will be felt and have an effect. I can be a shepherd of consciousness even if I can't see the sheep.