Stephen Sagarin

Thinking Like a Plant: A Living Science for Life by Craig Holdrege

Let's say there are two kinds of books—products and processes. Authors of products write, in essence, "Here. I've spent the last several years investigating something and here's what I've found." The "something" may be the story of Jay Gatsby or a history of World War I, but, as a product, the author is done with it. Now it's the reader's turn.

Books that are processes, on the other hand, say, "Come with me on a journey. I'm not sure where we're going or even when it will end, but I will try to entertain and inform you as we go." *Don Quixote* is a book like this, and so is Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast & Slow*. Books like this are not meant to be ingested in one sitting. They are trail mix for a trek.

Plants can be seen as products—I had some for dinner this evening—or as living processes. In his latest book, *Thinking Like a Plant: A Living Science for Life*, Craig Holdrege focuses on the latter as, at least, a metaphor for thinking.

Products are objects, or object-like. They can be bought and sold, weighed and measured. We have spent the past few hundred years developing to a high degree what Holdrege calls "object thinking." We have developed it to the point at which we objectify things that are not objects, things like "intelligence," measured by an IQ. That the concept of IQ has been largely demolished in the past few decades serves to show that we have also begun to question and to move away from the worst of our object thinking.

Holdrege's book aims to aid us in understanding and developing "living thinking," thinking that does not objectify the world. Object thinking distances us from the world, and distances us from ourselves, in that we eventually come to see even ourselves as objects in a world of objects. Living thinking encourages us to participate in the world, to experience our own existence and our own thinking as part of the world in which we live.

The book is written in six chapters. In the first chapter, Holdrege lays out the often unacknowledged challenges of object thinking, its replacement of the world in which we live, the world of our human experience, with a "disqualified" world of mental models, for example. And he introduces the concept of living thinking, thinking that is based in experience, participates in the world in which we live, and recognizes true holism.

In the second chapter he begins the process of transforming our experience from an object-based experience to one that is more participatory. He links the activities of observation and perception with the activity of thinking.

In the third chapter, "The Plant as Teacher of Transformation," the author uses the growth and transformation of a plant—from seed to shoot to stem and leaves, to calyx and corolla, to flower—as a resonant metaphor for the transformation in thinking that a truly participatory consciousness requires. (To return to Chapter 2: If we observe and think with old habits only, without an openness to

transformation, we are in danger of extending object thinking into our own interiors; and we are certainly only entertaining what Barfield called, pejoratively, "common sense.")

In chapter four Holdrege extends his description of plant existence to examine how the life of a plant necessarily demonstrates the context, the whole world, in which the plant exists. This is a genuine movement toward wholeness and engagement with the world. Against this, Holdrege sets "theory," which he finds "always limited."

Chapter five is the oddest, and it's also my favorite. It's about common milkweed, a plant I remember marveling over as a boy, but not one I ever expected to read about in a book about the transformation of human experience in the world. I won't give away too much, except to say that Holdrege's investigation yields this insight: "Milkweed invites life, but also holds it back. There is a fascinating tension in this plant." For Holdrege, this investigation and its results are not simply pabulum about the "balance of nature," for they have real ethical implications. As Holdrege says, "Transformational experience works beyond the moment into the future."

In the last chapter Holdrege summarizes the previous material and extends it to a consideration of education. He takes on our common notion of "preparation" in education, pointing out that postponing real, meaningful experience in the vain hope of "preparing" for some future—a job, sustainability, all worthy goals—undermines the value of education itself. The future is unpredictable, and only an education based in meaningful, transformative experiences can prepare students for the insight and creativity they will need to meet the future healthfully.

The author means us to see thinking as a living, growing process of transformation. We may begin by seeing this as a metaphor but, by the end of the book, he would probably say that it's not just a metaphor, that thinking is literally an invisible or immaterial plant-like process within each of us. Holdrege wants us to see plants as processes and their living growth as a movement or unfolding that is like that of thinking. He uses the phrase "living thinking" throughout the book, and, it seems to me, we could call this "real thinking."

Thinking Like a Plant refuses to fall into a category—philosophy? nature study? ecology? education? botany? By turns it is each of these, but it aims at an interdisciplinary wholeness that transcends these. In this, it is truly an anthroposophical work.

I don't mean that it fits into the historical stream of esoteric books that are footnotes to Rudolf Steiner's work, a stream that will flash before many readers' eyes at the mention of the word "anthroposophical."

What I mean is that it lays bare, we could say, what is usually hidden beneath the shiny hood of science writing. And what are usually hidden are the fits and starts, the frustrations of an actual scientist at work. This book shows not the product, polished for presentation, but the process. As such it is more accessible and potentially more valuable to readers, who are invited at every turn to take up this creative work for themselves.

Further, it aims at a genuine wholeness, what Henri Bortoft calls "upstream thinking," the reunification of disciplines and subjects that have become separated and fragmented over the past centuries. These characteristics—demystification (not in the sense of debunking, but in the sense of seeing through what is otherwise unseen) and reunification—are, I believe, characteristics of actual anthroposophical endeavor.

Michael Pollan's "How Smart Are Plants?" appeared recently in *The New Yorker*. As smart as Pollan's scientists may be, they're on a reductive track; their thinking is still object thinking. Holdrege's isn't, and he is struggling mightily and with great value to escape the prison of object thinking and, just as importantly, to show us how to do this for ourselves.

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