



# Grounding through the Sense Experience

## Preface to Articles by Rudolf Steiner and Albert Borgmann

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**W**e are embedded in a world rich with qualities. Just think of the realm of colors: the vivid and manifold colors of flowers, and all the fine shades of green in plant foliage; the changing blue of the sky during the day, and the nuanced, fleeting reds, oranges, yellows, and even greens at dusk and dawn; the dazzling configurations of colors in butterflies and birds; or, the subtle tones in a winter landscape. The sense world is an open invitation to participate in the creative nature of nature.

For many of us, the experience of this radiance is only given in special moments, such as when a sky-arching rainbow appears at the end of an afternoon thunderstorm, or we witness an ocean sunset with sky and water aglow. That sensory experience becomes dull for us—it is not dull for a young child!—is largely due to our modern habits of thought. We have become habituated to the world in such a way that we “know” what we experience without really experiencing it. We recognize the blue sky (or any other “thing”) and take it for granted; we know it’s blue and that’s that. But have we lived into the blue? Have we dwelled in the scent of a basil leaf? It is our mental habituation that gets in the way of the kind of receptivity that allowed Emerson to write: “It seems as if the day was not wholly profane, in which we have given heed to some natural object.”<sup>1</sup>

The distancing from vibrant experience that our inner constitution of thought brings about is of course heightened today through the fact that our lives are increasingly mediated by devices—whether they be cars, smart phones, or televisions. So we have a double hindrance to “get back to the things themselves,” as philosopher Edmund Husserl put it.<sup>2</sup>

In the articles by Rudolf Steiner and Albert Borgmann that follow, you will find descriptions of ways of connecting more deeply with the sensory world and the wisdom it can reveal.

The article by Steiner—actually selections from two lectures—stands out in his work as a unique description of a method to gain a spiritual grounding in the world through sense experience. He doesn’t say, “just turn off your thoughts and everything will be okay.” He knows how deeply ingrained thought habits are. He describes a series of inner dispositions that we can develop to increase our awareness of thought habits and overcome the dulling and distorting effect that intellectual thought can have. In the process, in his words, “all things in the sense world become new.” It is a treadable path. And it is a remarkably timely one for those of us living and teaching in a culture that tends to disconnect us from the very world that makes our existence possible—a world that needs our attention and care.

Albert Borgmann may not be known to most readers of this journal. Now in his eighties, Borgmann is an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Montana and most well known for his insightful writings on technology. In the essay reprinted here, Borgmann inquires into the kinds of experiences that connect us in a meaning-filled way with the world and contrasts them with experiences that may bring excitement, but that remain shallow and don’t allow us to create lasting bonds with the world.

Borgmann writes, “what is eminently real has a commanding presence and a telling and strong continuity with its world.” Exemplary commanding presences are, in Borgmann’s view, natural phenomena—forests, prairies, rivers; and every tree, rock, or cloud. All these features of the world are embedded in and carried by a whole array of relations; that is what he means by a “telling and strong continuity with its world.” Or we can think of John Muir’s words: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”<sup>3</sup> Due to this contextual nature, any natural phenomenon is “an embodiment and disclosure of the world it has emerged from.” They are in this sense more than meets the eye because they are revelatory of a larger world of connections. By engaging with such commanding presences, we ourselves can become more rooted in the world.

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1 Emerson, Ralph Waldo (1983). *Nature* (Essays, Second Series) in Emerson, R. W. *Essays and Lectures*. New York: Library of America. (This essay was first published in 1844.)

2 Husserl, Edmund (1900/1993). *Logische Untersuchungen* Band II, Teil 1. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, p. 6. English translation: *Logical Investigations* I-II, trans. J. N. Findlay. London: Routledge.

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3 Muir, John (2003). *My First Summer in the Sierra* New York: The Modern Library, p. 211. (Muir wrote these words on July 27, 1869.)

Importantly, Borgmann realizes that commanding presences can also be created in human culture through art and craft, through ceremonies, conversation, and more. Just think of what Borgmann calls the “culture of the table.” Members of a family cook a meal, they set the table and light a candle; before they begin to eat they say a grace, and then conversation ensues. This is the formation of a commanding presence. Everywhere where we consciously create such focal experiences, we are allowing our lives to be filled with meaning. I have described elsewhere how fruitful the idea of commanding presences can be in educational practice—when we work to orchestrate situations in which learners engage with commanding presences, with things that are really worth experiencing.<sup>4</sup>

Borgmann wrote his essay in 1995, long before the widespread use of the Internet and the ubiquitous presence of Google, Facebook, and smart phones in human lives. But already then—thinking of television, movies, and videos—he characterized “device culture” with words that only ring truer today: “Whatever is devoid of contextual bonds and hence freely, that is instantaneously and ubiquitously, available is therefore subject to our whims and control and cannot command our respect in its own right.” We often say today that with our devices everything is at our fingertips. But what is this “everything” that is always available and yet often so lacking in contextual bonds? We can really address this question when we’ve immersed ourselves in realities that are full of contextual relations, that are grounded in space and time. As our lives become increasingly mediated by devices, it becomes all the more important to let commanding presences that are rooted in sense experience become our teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> Holdrege, Craig (2013). *Thinking Like a Plant*. Great Barrington, Mass.: Lindisfarne Books, Chapter 6.