

Spirit of Place

BIODYNAMICS AND THE WISDOM OF THE REGIONS

In Partnership with the Spirits of Place

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ONE OF MY GREATEST JOYS when traveling is experiencing the subtle and dramatic shifts that occur in the landscape when moving from one region to another. How different is the feeling and personality of the Northeast, for example—with its many hills, woods, intimate valleys, and rocky soils—than, say, the wide open spaces of the Midwest, not to mention the desert landscapes of Utah or Arizona? And, of course, within each region there are the endless subtle variations, microclimates, and transition zones. Besides our joy and delight in these experiences, we might well ask ourselves: what exactly are regions in a deeper sense? And what is their role in biodynamics?

Biodynamics works out of the knowledge that there are hosts of invisible forces and beings working in the natural world—that nature as we know it would not even exist without these invisible forces. Often these forces are referred to as “cosmic forces” because their origin lies in the wider universe, in the realms of the sun, moon, and stars, rather than in the earthly realm as such.

We hear a lot in biodynamics, for example, about what are called “life forces,” which are understood to be the invisible forces that bestow vitality on matter and, in doing so, transform inert substance into life. These are sometimes also called the “etheric forces,” or “formative forces.” We also talk about what are called the “astral forces” or the “soul forces,” which are understood to be the invisible forces that endow biological life with a quality of sentience, inwardness, or even feeling.

Rudolf Steiner perceived that plants have a physical body and an etheric body, whereas animals have a physical body, an etheric body, and an astral body, which is why we experience most animals as having a wider range of capacities, feelings, and sensations than a plant. Yet it is also true that the whole earth has an etheric body as well as an astral body. Thus, while plants do not have their own astral body, they do participate in the astral forces of the whole planet and thus have many sentient qualities, without yet being animals.

A third invisible force working in the natural world is the force of individuality, which we could call “I-ness.” This is the force that creates a quality of coherence, continuity, and identity among the diverse forces within nature. We see this force working, for example, in the

fact that there are distinct plant and animal species that cohere and maintain themselves over long periods of time. Human beings embody the force of individuality more strongly than any other being of the natural world, and actually call themselves “I.” To paraphrase the great educator Edith Cobb, “each human being is thus a kind of species unto themselves.”¹

Individuality is the youngest force in the evolutionary process, which is one of the reasons, by the way, that human beings behave so much like willful children and foolish adolescents! But that is another story.

Beyond the human being, I would suggest that one of the clearest ways we can see the force of individuality working in nature is in the regions and their unique personalities. Behind the amazing coherence of the geology, geography, climate, plants, animals, and human culture in a given region stands a mighty spiritual being bearing the force of individuality. This was well known in earlier times. In Roman and later European cultures, for example, there lived the concept of the *genii loci*, or the “genius of place” or “spirit of place,” which, in a more abstract form, has had a deep influence on architecture right up to the present day. The French concept of *terroir*, I would suggest, is also related to this ancient feeling for the work of the *genii loci*. We can perhaps imagine these spirits of place holding hands across the planet like a grove of mature trees anchored in the web of their diversity, interconnections, and cross-fertilizations.

In ancient times, human beings were much more deeply interwoven with these beings; in fact, much of our own sense of I-ness derived from the sense of place engendered by these beings. Over time, we human beings have more and more freed ourselves from a dependence on the *genii loci* for our sense of identity.

Rudolf Steiner pointed out that, in our time, the spiritual beings and forces at work in nature, including the *genii loci*, are growing ever weaker. This is the result, on the one hand, of the growth and spread of materialistic culture. Think of the impact on the *genii loci*, for example, who live in the dance of their diversity, of the homogenizing culture of the fast food chains or the resonance-disturbing frequencies of cell phone towers! The deeper reason, however, is that we live in a time when the forces and beings of nature require the free cooperation of human beings in order to remain active and healthy. In

other words, human beings, having been liberated from an unconscious relationship to nature and the *genii loci*, must now step into their proper role as conscious co-creators with nature, as partners with the spirits of place. We must learn to work creatively, giving and taking with nature, out of a higher ecological consciousness, rather than remaining either passive recipients of her wisdom or willful miners of her riches.

Against this backdrop, I wish to close by outlining ever so briefly some of the ways that biodynamics works with, and can contribute to, the health of the regions and to the *genii loci* themselves. And let me add that I think many, many farmers and gardeners (conventional, regenerative, organic, permaculture, and biodynamic) are working actively with these principles and processes I am about to describe, whether they are conversant with this conceptual framework or not. The reality is that this wisdom lives deep in all human beings, particularly in farmers and gardeners who have a genuine love for the earth. Yet it is also true that we should not underestimate the immense significance this kind of conscious knowledge of the invisible forces of nature can have—and will more and more have in the future—for our work in agriculture.

First of all, biodynamic farmers strive to tune their farms to the forces and wisdom of their region. This is something all farmers must do, to some degree, but in biodynamics it can become a high art. This is expressed in the choice of plant varieties and animal breeds for the farm, the approach to water management and irrigation, preparation making, tillage methods, how value is added to products, integration of wild areas, and so on. By sensing the wisdom working in the wider region together with the needs of a particular farm and community, biodynamic practitioners strive to imbue all their decisions with a “holistic intelligence” similar to that working in the landscape around them.

In this process, however, biodynamic farmers and gardeners are not just “mimicking” the wisdom of nature or “embedding” their farm ever more strongly in the lap of the region. They are also, each and every day, building up a quality of coherence and identity on their farms and gardens that has the potential to give a home to completely new *genii loci* on the planet—to new spirits of place that, in turn, can rejuvenate the existing *genii loci* of a region. This, I would suggest, is one of the deeper ways we can understand the term “farm individuality” as used by Rudolf Steiner.

The farm thus not only receives and models itself on the wisdom of the region; it also becomes a center radiating out its own light and warmth and individuality into the region as a source of healing and cultural renewal. We have a visible image of this process through the food that

is produced on the farm and its distribution across the region, which permeates its eaters with a sense of place, as well with a sense of health, vitality, and even I-ness. This is the lofty vision of the biodynamic farm.

Finally, we can imagine a further stage in the radiating out of the health-bringing influences of a biodynamic farm or garden, which can be indicated by the phrases “regional biodynamic land management” or “regional biodynamic earth healing.” Ultimately, human beings must begin to manage whole regions, including the non-agricultural lands, out of this same loving wisdom. Think, for example, of the benefits that could accrue from the rhythmical and extensive spraying of preparation 500 (horn manure) along the California coastline or in New Orleans or other locations where the earth forces are inherently weak. Ideally of course, such activity would always take place as an outgrowth of the work of biodynamic farms already in those regions and in conjunction with a host of other appropriate forms of landscape management. Or think of a whole watershed being managed out of the kind of etheric wisdom demonstrated by Viktor Schauburger or Theodor Schwenk.² This is just the barest indication of the direction our work could take in the future, as we learn to work ever more in partnership with spirits of place—the ultimate source of all that we love about our distinct and diverse regions and regional cultures.

NOTES

¹ See her wonderful book, *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*.

² See, for example, *Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air* by Theodor Schwenk, or *Viktor Schauburger: A Life of Learning from Nature* by Jane Cobbald.

Robert Karp is Co-Director of the Biodynamic Association, where he also holds Partnerships and Strategic Initiatives, Book Publishing, and Fundraising roles. Robert has helped start numerous innovative food projects, including community supported agriculture projects (CSAs), farmers’ markets, institutional buying projects and farmer-buyer-consumer alliances. Robert lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

