



## **Relationality and Life Essence**

*Text of lecture given by Simon Davison on the 18<sup>th</sup> November 2015*

### **The Relationality Symposium Otago University, Dunedin, New Zealand**

I would like to begin by acknowledging the original persons of this land. Their traditions have much to teach us about the connection of earth and spirit. It is fitting that a Symposium of Relationality should take place here. May it mark the beginning of a serious endeavour to establish *Relationality* for its primary importance in redefining our relationships and helping us navigate an uncertain future. I would like to thank Dr Simone Drichel and others for their efforts in bringing us together. I am very pleased to be here to present and also to learn from all of you. We are going to cover a lot of ground in the coming days and it bodes well for a rich shared experience.

The interrelatedness of existence and working for greater integration has been a core drive in my life. I was born in England to English parents. Years lived in India taught me to appreciate ambiguity and paradox as pathways to deeper understanding. India with its diverse culture has much to teach us in these regards. A prime example is the greatly misunderstood philosophy of Tantra. Tantra literally means: *the weave of warp and weft that stretches and expands and simultaneously binds and liberates*. It could be said to be the original philosophy of *Relationality*!

The purpose of my presentation is to show how linking *Relationality* and, what I refer to as, *Life Essence* can help us to engage the implications of *Relationality* more effectively. There are 4 main parts:

1. *First, I will describe my understanding of Relationality and the role of Life Essence*
2. *Secondly, to view this understanding through the lens of our interpersonal relationships*
3. *Thirdly, to show how Relationality and Life Essence apply to society*
4. *And lastly how Relationality and Life Essence, the personal and collective are all linked*

#### **1. My understanding of Relationality and the role of Life Essence.**

My work with *Relationality* as a specific concept started in 2007 when co-teaching a graduate elective at Yale University on the deeper meaning of 'Care' and subsequently in exploring how the ubiquitous nature of *Relationality* may be applied. I would argue that engaging the inherent *Relationality* of all existence is essential to secure our long term human survival and flourishing, *and* address deep seated issues negatively impacting society and the earth. I concede this is no small task as practically incorporating *Relationality* into our thinking opens



us up to vulnerability on a grand scale as we attempt to take on what is seemingly impossible. The notion of being choicelessly bound to the other and not having control over the other is deeply threatening. It is like being in love without the benefits - *I will say more on this later.*

A universal conceptual architecture of *Relationality* is required that offers a credible alternative scenario to existing modalities, and helps us hold the simultaneity and uncertainty implicit in the relationship of opposites: unity and diversity, inclusivity and exclusivity. I believe this can be achieved when *Relationality* is understood as inseparable from what I term *Life Essence*. Allowing such a conceptual foundation to impact our thinking would open the door to a dimension of creative engagement that honours living value and the dynamic proportionality of the collective and the particular. Such active participation and taking responsibility for the underlying reality of *Relationality* would represent a paradigm shift in how we understand and respond to complex issues facing us in the world today and profoundly impact our understanding of democracy, individual and collective identity, and social and economic value. In short, the concept of *Relationality and Life Essence* informs both thought and action.

I invite you to stay with me as I further establish an understanding of what I mean by *Relationality and Life Essence*. I interpret *Relationality* as more than merely a state or condition of being relational. Being relational, important as it is, implies a level of comfort, order and predictability that fails to tell the whole story. In contrast, *Relationality* includes both the relational and non-relational. It is a continuum of mutuality and effect whether or not there is a manifest relationship. Put another way, it dramatically confronts us with the reality of the infinite interconnectedness and interdependence of the seen and unseen material universe of which I am a part, whether or not I am actually in a relationship. Space time exists within the context of infinity and has an elasticity that is both sequential and simultaneous and highly unpredictable. *Relationality* is accommodating of measurement but the limits of measurement we impose should not be confused with the core complex reality. When we introduce *Life Essence* an even more complex reality is revealed. If *Relationality* is of infinity, *Life Essence* is of eternity. *Life Essence* exists outside space time and is immeasurable and indivisible. As mentioned earlier *Life Essence* and *Relationality* are inseparable. How are they connected? *Life Essence* is the virtuality of *Relationality*: the unseen force that holds the multidimensional manifest universe together and gives ultimate meaning. *Life Essence* serves as a bridge that facilitates access and communication. Life respects life and is not bound by form. Symbolically this elegant interplay can be represented with the lateral figure of eight symbol of infinity: two distinct spheres representing the duality of *Relationality* linked by *Life Essence* at the centre, facilitating a balanced energetic flow of exchange. What *Relationality and Life Essence* taken together teach us is that the manifest world of everyday relationships and functioning is intrinsically enmeshed and related with infinite ways of understanding the relationships in and outside of time. It is enormously forgiving of human action that imposes arbitrary limits out of an excessive need to control and manipulate outcomes. *Relationality and Life Essence* has an accommodating elasticity where negative effects of imbalanced actions



are stretched out in time and are eventually redeemed as the *elasticity* contracts. What is concerning is the sheer exponential growth in human activity that is making everything so much tighter. We are in an era of space time compression with decreasing opportunities to mitigate the damage.

I hope I have been able to give you some sense of the immense energetic beauty of what we are working with. My intention has been to lay out the larger contextual dimension of *Relationality* that most approximates reality as I understand it. Doing so I believe emphasises both the challenge and opportunity to re-evaluate who we are. I recognise that what I have said may feel like a bit of a reach. I ask that you dare to imagine with me as we proceed.

## **2. Viewing Relationality through the Lens of interpersonal relationships.**

When I ask people *what matters most to them in life?* The answer is invariably relational recognised as; love of a spouse child, parent, and friends. Please take a moment to ask yourselves this question and see if you come up with a similar answer. *What matters most to you in life?* Let me know at the end during questions if any of you think what matters most in life is a Ferrari! I would love to know. Still if we ask ourselves what exactly *is love* we would be hard pressed to clearly and definitively say what it is, even though at some level we really do know and our lives lack meaning without it. I feel the same way about *Relationality*. Even though I have spent the last few minutes describing it, I have trouble defining exactly what it is. My point here is that as persons there is a deep connection with how we experience both love and *Relationality*. *Relationality* as understood with *Life Essence* is experienced as all-embracing, uncompromising, accommodating, compassionate, authentic and full of vitality and pushes us to the limit. It puts us on a collision course with everyday life and sets up impossible scenarios to which we have to respond. This description could also describe how we experience love!

My reflections have led me to understand that *Relationality and Life Essence* is essentially a force for good that simply exists and needs no support. An example of what I mean happened some years ago when confronted with the human capacity to commit genocide. I decided that I needed to find out if there is an absolute evil that also simply exists and needs no support. I was apprehensive. What happened if I discovered that there is? What then? In spite of my fears I was committed to finding out the truth and my meditations and reflections took me on an inner journey allowing the question to echo and reveal deepening insights. I realised that evil always needs some justification, some supporting condition to exist. It is forever hungry. It is never satisfied, self-sustaining, quiet or complete. Behind this is an absence of evil that I can only describe as goodness; an all-encompassing goodness that has no opposite or limit. And it is so fine, so quietly present that unless we pay careful attention we might just miss it.



Yet it is at the heart of all the small acts of kindness that happen every day. It is what gives us the trust to share a confined space with strangers on a train and live and work in a jostling big city. I would not fully trust this insight without having given myself full heartedly to this experience in a non-calculating way. My willingness to offer up my vulnerable humanity allowed a pure intent and innocence to be the vehicle for this process and something got embedded in my very core that continues to nourish me. I urge you all to examine this question of absolute evil, if you have not already done so. Perhaps you will come up with a different answer!

In describing this quiet goodness it may seem as if the person simply needs to sit passively and goodness will align itself with our actions automatically. True, it accommodates our actions even if we fail to acknowledge it, but another key aspect I would like you to consider is that human beings have to make a conscious choice to align themselves with this goodness. In other words participating with *Relationality and Life Essence* in a meaningful participative way will not happen by itself but requires an act of choice coming out of the goodness in us.

So how do we relate to *Relationality and Life Essence*? We do that by recognising *Relationality and Life Essence* is in ourselves. Therefore, I believe the only way we as human beings can fully appreciate and participate with *Relationality and Life Essence* and its implications, is by the claiming of a personal '*I am*' through our humanity. We already do this in our love and intimate relationships. We make a choice and deeply turn up for the other and are willing to embrace uncertainty and certainty. We allow the love of the other to affect us and change us and yet still remain who we are. The best of love relationships make us strong and affirmed and at the same time vulnerable and open inspiring attributes such as humility, care, compassion, courage, kindness, generosity and gratitude. This does not happen without a claiming of the personal '*I am*' and the conscious intention of choosing this love. It is interesting to note that we call ourselves *human*, which is related to goodness and all the attributes just mentioned, and *being* which means to exist and belong to the universe of all things material and immaterial. Human is also connected with the humus of the earth; the rich soil formed from decomposing organic matter that grows new life. These qualities really do reflect the universal matter and spirit of our humanity. We embody *Relationality and Life Essence*. Choosing to claim the personal '*I am*' and offer our consciousness to our human matter to be broken down and reformed is an act of *love* and *will* that requires us to stay awake and participate. It took me years to acknowledge the terror I would feel every morning on my first waking moment. This act of love is scary. It takes us into our most vulnerable places of fear, doubt and uncertainty. We are so used to relating to these emotions and feelings negatively. Yet having the courage to be with these rejected parts of ourselves connects us consciously to the *Relationality and Life Essence* dimension of existence in a way that is free of manipulation and calculation. There is a sense of simultaneity. That everything is happening at once. Fear and uncertainty does not necessarily disappear. Yet there is a feeling



of connection that is edgy and alive. We are multidimensional beings and part of the gift of being human is to hold often conflicting opposites and ambiguities in a dynamic relationship of love much the same way the universe does. What we bring to the table is consciousness which is at the same time, both painful and uplifting. We carry the burden of responsibility within the limitations of who we are as well as an ultimate freedom of spirit. Claiming '*I am*' through the authority of our humanity sets up a creative tension that pulls us in all directions. Yet in choosing love, we get to participate and are supported by the inherent being-ness and intent that is *love* itself. *Relationality and Life Essence* is not a standard of self-virtue that we need to attain in order to relate and participate. The attributes of love and goodness are gifts that can be present even in the depths of despair and disturbance; perhaps even more so. As we all know life gets messy. My intention is to illuminate the key components and attitudes that place us in a dynamic relationship with the reality of *Relationality and Life Essence* and perhaps more importantly, with the means to participate creatively.

This brings me to the third part of what I want to share: having given an overview of the scope of *Relationality and Life Essence* and the need for a personal '*I am*', I will turn my focus now on how this understanding relates to society.

### **3. *Relationality and Life Essence in the Societal Domain***

To begin with let us remind ourselves that *Relationality and Life Essence* represents the reality that everything is interrelated and interdependent and held together by life force. All human and natural activity is embraced by *Relationality and Life Essence*. All the distortion, violence and destruction going on in the world, as well as absolute goodness, all are part of the milieu of reality represented by *Relationality and Life Essence*. The question is how does society harness *Relationality and Life Essence* for the greater good? I asked earlier, *what matters most to you in life?* Now I ask, how does society come to ask the question and answer of itself, *what matters most to society? - is life!* As I said; the conscious intention of making a choice for '*love*' in the interpersonal domain of our existence claimed through a personal "*I am*" makes us strong and affirmed, and vulnerable and open, inspiring attributes such as humility, care, compassion etc. But as persons in society, this still leaves the question of how societies can choose *life?* What must transpire for the life-supporting attributes that manifest in the interpersonal domain, to also manifest in societal practices, policies and other societal arrangements?

Asking this question of society is not so straightforward. Society does not have the obvious living centre of our humanity as a connector. Society is externalised collective energy. If we were to characterise the difference between the claiming a personal '*I am*' through our humanity, as authenticating the reality of *Relationality and Life Essence*, the claiming of '*I am*'



in society works the opposite way. Think Ferrari! The externalised '*I am*' affirms itself through identifying with objects of value. The bigger the better! So whereas the conscious movement of the personal is from the self-reflective inner '*I am*' to the outer; the conscious movement of the societal collective is from the outer to the self-reflective inner.

The way to understand the externalised movement of society is through value and value identity. In any value equation two or more objects of value are linked and defined by their relationship. The inherent *Relationality and Life Essence* of the equation is usually not acknowledged and the objects of value take precedence. Yet it is *Relationality and Life Essence* that gives meaning to a value exchange. I remember some years ago going into Dubai city from the airport passing a new BMW showroom that was about to open and a banner declared: *joy is arriving soon*. Advertisers knowingly or unknowingly, put *Relationality and Life Essence* at the heart of a declaration to buy an object or service offered because instinct tells them it sells product. Dead products don't sell! *Relationality and Life Essence* also supports diversity and equilibrium and the more the objects of value are distanced from *Life Essence* the more dramatic the realignment of balance. The financial turmoil of 2009 is a good example of what I mean. The objects of value, in this case being money and complex financial derivatives, were so far removed from a tangible real asset that collapse was inevitable. The underlying movement of the banking crisis was a movement to restore balance even though this is not how it is fully seen or understood by the financial industry. Perhaps one day we will have a *Relationality life* index on the stock market that values securities according to their *Relationality Life Essence* value. Then the debates on how much regulation or not would be put in a realistic context.

I think this is a good time to emphasise a few more operational aspects of *Relationality and Life Essence*. Putting *Life Essence* at the heart of *Relationality* is like having an impartial referee managing the *Relationality* continuum and keeping order. Whereas objects can and are manipulated within time frames, *Life Essence* cannot be. Yet *Life Essence* exercises an overall authority maintaining balance and supporting life. If persons and society could recognise the primary authority of *Relationality and Life Essence* and act accordingly, many of the world's problems would be alleviated. Instead we are playing a game we do not understand and overly identify with and give disproportionate authority to objects of value and collective value identities perpetuating distortion and disturbance. Another point is our perceived need to be objective and impartial with an over reliance on reason and measurement. We live in a seamless universe with lots of cracks in it. It is confounding, as is our place in it. Though we can understand the universality of *Relationality and Life Essence* our relationship is partial. We look from behind a plate glass window at all this promise, afraid to fully participate. We should be brave enough to free our imagination, without losing our capacity for discernment, and learn a different mode of engagement, enacting our will with love and wisdom.



Value identities drive societies. Money, nationalism, ethnicity, religion are four big value identities of which money is the most ubiquitous. All value identities share similar traits in that they assume power and determine levels of access. People and things are valued according to their usefulness and degree of participation with the core value identity. In contrast *Relationality and Life Essence* has no identity and can never be acquired and controlled.

Adopting *Relationality and Life Essence* as a guiding principle changes the parameters of societal thinking, giving fresh insight into the scope and ramifications of its actions. It positively redefines power and authority in favour of our humanity and all life. When a society is secure in its understanding of *Relationality and Life Essence*, leaders and participants are able to engage the limits of their humanity and the constraints of a situation in a less defended way. By aligning with the underlying reality, an individual or group is more able to call into question the dominant power of fixed value identities in a society. Adversarial positions, deep rooted fear and imbalanced self-interest are placed in a bigger context minimising their disruption and encouraging more balanced and integrated policies. Inclusivity to the point that no one aspect is able to destabilise the whole becomes the policy making framework within which competing interests are held to account.

Value identities will always maintain an 'us' and a 'them' and be divisive. (*It is a saving grace that we tend to run a number of them concurrently!*) The more extreme we are in adopting one particular value identity, the more we believe this value identity is the only meaningful reality. This further entrenches prejudice and rejection of the other, including being closed to new ideas and approaches. We become slaves of our value identity and conditioned by it so that we are unconscious of what it means to be free of it. All value identities follow a similar pattern. We lose the imagination and will to reason and think freely. I fear that in spite of the serious intent, the forthcoming Climate Change Conference in Paris will demonstrate my point. Even more so following the tragic events there of the past week. Imagine how different the debate could be if it was framed by an understanding of *Relationality and Life Essence*. Disempowering the value identity does not mean that nationality, ethnicity, religion or money etc. cease to have value. On the contrary, by being placed in the larger *Relationality and Life Essence* context their value more meaningfully contributes to a cohesive and diverse holism.

Making *Relationality and Life Essence* the guiding principle puts the humanity of policy makers and leaders at the heart of the decision making process. It links the human dimension with the larger life essence dimension and through *Relationality* makes them accountable. At present leaders who really care are placed in impossible positions as their caring sensibility is squeezed and marginalised by powerful competing interests. *Relationality and Life Essence* places all interests in a dynamic proportion to each other maintaining an involved humanity at the core. This releases our human potential and keeps alive our need and ability to care. This



fact will profoundly change how we live and value one another and manage resources. This brings me to my fourth and last part:

#### ***4. How Relationality and life essence, the personal and collective are linked***

I would like to give a sense of how *Relationality and Life Essence*, the personal and the collective work together. It is best summed up by understanding the role of limitation. The overwhelming aspect of *Relationality* is the infinite interconnectedness and interdependence. There is an irony in that there seems to be no easy way to fully relate to this total interrelatedness. This is perhaps because we try and engage it as another object of value. *Relationality* related to something else is not relationality. So apart from its reflective value, how do we engage *Relationality* fully? The person is the key. If *Relationality and Life Essence* represents totality then the person represents limitation. As mentioned earlier, we embody *Relationality and Life Essence*, and it is through our limited humanity that we gain access. Actually it is the very fact of our limitation that brings the *Relationality and Life Essence* dimension into play. By actively choosing life we set up an impossible tension: how am I going to respond; I have limited resources; I don't know what to do etc. But the fact that we are committed to life brings a different kind of focus to the challenge facing us. We are not driven by fear even though fear may be present. There is not the struggle with uncertainty that has the overbearing need to be in control. I am not using the false security of my value identities to liaise on my behalf. There is a direct engagement that has soft edges and is open and alive. This is the creative tension we need to hold; a simultaneous appreciation of the diversity of our reality. We become the pivot point able to hold the centre ground as well as opposite poles. It may feel like the heat of an alchemic crucible and yet there is also a coolness of space. We gain access to all the resources of life itself; the infinite interconnectedness in and out of time.

The societal domain is not different. When groups of persons are committed to life the same creative resources are available. Limitations and constraints are engaged through our humanity backed up by the knowledge that we and the challenges we face are part of something bigger that is already accommodating and balancing our reality. Think how different the response to the current refugee crisis in the Middle East would be if the life of each person was primary. All the other self-interested concerns; political, security, economic etc. would have their place but would not be overshadowing the humanitarian response as is now the case. When the former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan made his millennium speech '*We the Peoples*' he gave tribute to the primacy of the person. It is a person centred future as part of a living collective that will carry us forward; a future where each person holds a collective value. Perhaps power in a future democracy is in the *Relationality* of all persons, governed by the *Life Essence* that links them. The more a group of persons has access to resources, the greater the responsibility to the other. The survival of all of us depends on it.





So to conclude: I have given an interpretation of *Relationality* when linked with *Life Essence* that gives it a universal context which can then be applied to the personal and the collective and in doing so offers, what I hope is a credible alternative means of engaging our reality. A thought that may well be in your minds and one which I also have at times is that these ideas are all very well but they are *unrealistic*. I am reminded of a conversation I had some years ago. I was asked by a person who had held senior positions in government and the United Nations what I would say to an economist or policy maker who challenged my ideas as - *unrealistic*. I replied that I would first ask them to tell me why they thought what they were doing was *realistic*. He laughed and said I had a point. I mention this story because any clear thinking person can see our current modes of action will not sustain or end well. I personally continue to find inspiration and insight from *Relationality and Life Essence* as a concept. Where I get into trouble is when I get complacent and think I have the answer. And so I have to revisit all these ideas and make them alive to me again. Writing this presentation should have been easy given all the existing material I have. Yet I had to write most of it afresh. In doing so, I have discovered new ways of understanding and seeing this wonderful articulation we call *Relationality*.

It is heartening to see *Relationality* gaining more recognition. However, there is a real danger that the term becomes a convenient catch-all relational basket lacking discernment. This will be a lost opportunity to hone and fashion what I believe can be a powerful concept, that when properly applied is capable of taking on the intractable issues of the day and holding different disciplines to account. My hope is that this conference is a catalyst for future research and development and that we gain momentum behind this subject with the resources and attention it deserves.

I would like to end by sharing the following phrase that has been with me for many years:

*A head of state and a man herding goats in the Sahel are more closely related through a human relationship of mutual value than in a world separated by value identity.*

For me, this statement is an on-going reminder of that which may not fit easily into my grand scheme of things. I feel what I am sharing today is a step closer to bringing these two persons together. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak.

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*18<sup>th</sup> November 2015*

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