

# STAYING IN TOUCH WITH OUR ECOLOGICAL SELF

## Sensation, emotional intelligence and resilience

Viola Sampson

From the time of the last ice age's great continental ice sheets' slow retreat to the poles, a goddess figurine, carved from mammoth ivory, nestled in the foothills of the Pyrenees in southern France. Archaeologists date this figurine as around 25,000 years old – one of the oldest yet to be discovered. Following the evolution of goddess images in stories across cultures and through time, the figurine's relatively youthful descendent is Eve (meaning mother of all life) in the Garden of Eden.

Just six thousand years ago, the story of Adam and Eve was born in Bronze Age Sumer, often called cradle of civilisation. It heralded the end of thousands of years of earth-centred spiritual traditions and ways of knowing that the goddess figurine intimates. While this story emerged from motifs carried in even older stories and across many cultures, it formed the Creation myth of the Judeo-Christian heritage whose archetypal references inform much of the modern western world.

The story emerged around the time of the decline of Sumerian civilisation, during the period 2100-1700BC, which saw a relocation of the population northwards as the agricultural land became salinified, together with the sudden expansion of the Sahara desert (5000–1000BC). This is a time when archaeologists begin to place their discoveries of the earliest weapons of war, records of battles and remains of fortified towns.

Whether you read it as a prophesy of humanity's fate, a creation story, or a depiction of archetypal dynamics that were emerging sixty centuries ago, the story of Adam and Eve is dripping with meaning and significance for this planet time. Within the symbolism of Adam, Eve, the serpent and the Tree of Knowledge are references to embodiment, sensuality, instinct, and consciousness. That Eden is a sacred garden, not wilderness, depicts an intricate relationship between humans and nature. The story can be seen as a description of a radical change in self consciousness, our relationship to Nature and our bodies.



**Replica of the Goddess of Lespugue, carved from tusk ivory (Gravettian, Upper Paleolithic); France, Musée de L'Homme, Paris**



Times Past

### **Biting the apple**

From Bronze Age Sumer, we now scroll forwards in time – through the decline of ancient Greeks and the Roman empire, past Plato and Socrates – to 1500. It was around this time that Columbus sailed across uncharted seas to reach America, and the Magellan expedition circumnavigated the globe for the very first time. It was at this time that Copernicus's heliocentric theory, demonstrating how the earth orbited the sun, sparked the beginning of the scientific revolution.

Within the time span of just one generation, the earth was no longer flat, and nor was it the solid, heavy, fixed centre of the universe. All that was known about the earth and the cosmos from the perspective of the experiencing, embodied human self, was radically and irrevocably changed. The earth was now unsteady – part of a much expanded universe, a revolving globe floating through in the heavens according to the laws of matter.

Suddenly new intellectual leaps were needed to understand Copernicus's theory: The human mind must be projected into the heavens, and look down at the earth; the sun must be chosen as a central, commanding still point. An embodied sense of a solid, still earth and moving sun must be overruled.

The cosmos, until then the starry realm of gods and dark mysteries, had succumbed to human reason, its order laid open in all its splendour in a dazzling mathematical model. This must have been a time of great intellectual and spiritual upheaval. The religious authorities at the time rejected Copernicus's theories. He and his colleagues were quite isolated in their endeavours.

Even 100 years after Copernicus, Galileo writes:

*"..Nor can I sufficiently admire the outstanding acumen of those who have taken hold of this opinion and accepted it as true: they have through sheer force of intellect done such violence to their own senses as to prefer what reason told them over that which sensible experience showed them to be the contrary."*<sup>1</sup>



**Imprint**

With the scientific revolution, a new intellectual brilliance came as a triumph of objective reason over subjective, embodied knowing. This breathtaking leap of scientific progress is equally an expression of our downfall. It was a bite of the apple that irrevocably changed our self-consciousness – a new sense of objectivity – just as Adam and Eve reached to clothe themselves in fig leaves.

Not only had an entirely new way of reasoning been forged, but the theory transformed humanity's place in the world, our relation to the divine, with our self and our bodies. The entire world was reenvisioned, and the ramifications of this – psychologically, scientifically, ecologically, existentially and spiritually – are still unfolding today: This worldview structures our ways of thinking and informs our understanding of ourselves and permeates every aspect of our discourse. It is so close to our perception that it has formed the basis of a kind of common sense – although it was common sense that once told us that the sun travelled around the earth.

Worldviews shape our worlds, but also our sense of self in the world – extending inwards as well as outwards. They organise our psychic and somatic experience and our patterns of relating with the world. The reasoning mind that reduced the workings of the cosmos to a set of mechanical interactions, and prizes objectivity as a way of knowing the world, has also alienated us from our part in the universe.

### **The price of objectivity and the development of deep intersubjectivity**

Objective knowing requires a separation between subject and object: It requires distance, and a rejection of subjectivity, and so generates an experience of a fundamental separation between the experiencing human self (subject) and the rest of the world (object).

In this system of understanding, inanimate, objective facts that make up the world 'out there' are given meaning and coherence 'in here' by the power of the human intellect. This means the human self acts upon the

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<sup>1</sup> *Dialogue concerning the two chief world systems, quoted in Tarnas, Cosmos and psyche 2006 Viking Penguin p9*



After Rain

world, defining it. No pattern or meaning exists except as constructed by the human mind. For the clear thinking enshrined in modern scientific reason, the factual world must not contain subjectivity and therefore inherent meaning or conscious intelligence.

A continuity of subjectivity that could extend from the interior world of the human to the surrounding (and permeating) world is interrupted. Responsive, creative intelligence, as well as consciousness, spirit or soul, are all believed to be qualities only of the human world. Indeed, any recognition of human-attributed qualities in the encompassing world is dismissed as projection and anthropomorphic. As a result, the encompassing world is seen as passive, inert, inarticulate and non-participatory. Instead of consciousness and intelligence being a fundamental, pervasive force of the universe, we think of it being created by the circuitry of the brain, rather than received by it.

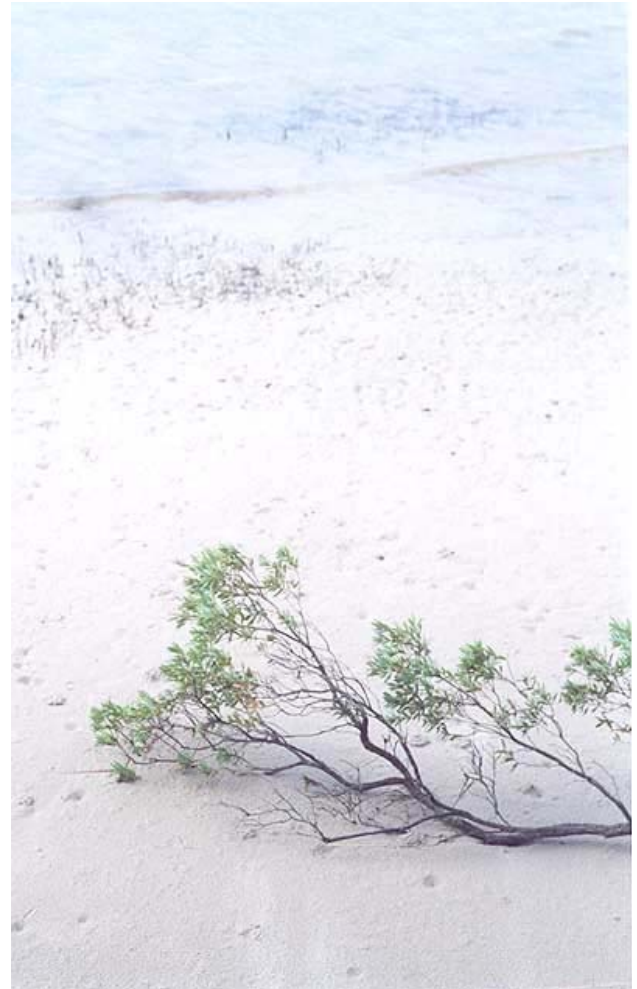
As the world is disenchanted and objectified in this way, humanity's uniqueness in subjectivity is magnified, giving a greater sense of freedom and power over the world. Perhaps this thinking split between subject and object, is one logical conclusion of Eve's first bite of the apple when the state of wholeness and unity fell into apparent opposites – good and evil, man and woman, life and death, sickness and health, mind and body, subject and object. These dualisms are alive in our culture today, and for example, in rationalising thinking, quantity, an objective measurement, supersedes quality – a function of subjectivity, and essential to an embodied, relational understanding of the world.

However, being able to stay with a paradox of two apparently contradictory truths simultaneously, can allow us to grow beyond this mode of thinking. If we are able to hold the tension of two opposites, like the energy of the string on a bow powering an arrow, something new can arise. Between quantity and quality, deeper meaning can sing through. Between subject and object, a new kind of relationship between two subjects can arise.

If you choose to assign the sun as the still point in an ever-moving universe, it is mechanically true that planet Earth orbits the sun. It is also true, however, that from an embodied reality, where I am an earthly, embodied centre of the universe, the sun moves up into in the sky, and down, around the earth, around me. Holding those two truths together can generate a tension, and sometimes a sense of relief.

Staying with an experience of our own subjectivity, together with an awareness of that which we are perceiving also has subjectivity, is an attentiveness that I call deep intersubjectivity. This deep intersubjectivity is somewhere between complete merging with the Whole and a separateness: It is about quality of engagement; right distance and meaningful contact; likeness within difference; identification within differentiation; a balanced state of awareness. This does not mean rejecting objectivity in favour of subjectivity; rather it calls forth this new kind of subjectivity that embraces both. It has the feel of a completion, a kind of holism. As with all states of balance, it is often only experienced as a glimpse, for at any one time, we may be more drawn out towards the other, or more engrossed in our sense of separate self.

In holding the tension of deep intersubjectivity – of me, of you, of the tree outside the window – a new awareness of an ecological self can arise. The ecological self provides a sense of continuity with all of life on earth and the energetic and material world. With an experiential awareness of the ecological self, our individualised self-interests can fade as the interests of the Whole come to the fore, whether that Whole be the ecosystem in which we live, a community of beings, or the global climate system. With an experiential understanding of deep intersubjectivity, the other-than-human world is no longer an object for us to act upon, but an experiencing subject with which we relate, and of which we are a part.



VenusBay

### **Perception, embodiment and enworldment**

Our sensory perception mediates our relationship with our world and our perception is intimately bound with our subjectivity. So it is possible to explore a personal experience of our ecological self through perceptual practice – through being awake to our senses and to the active process of perception and honouring subjective experience.

#### **Awareness of reciprocity and relationship deepens our perceptual capacities**

Perception is an expression of relationship and an expression of reciprocity. It is both a receiving and an active reaching out. When you touch the bark of an oak tree, the bark touches your hand; your hand is part of the tactile world it explores and the world offers you a chance to explore your own tactility.

Becoming aware of the relational aspect of our perception cultivates our experience of deep intersubjectivity and awareness of interrelationships that means we can more easily recognise wholeness. Once we can experience the Whole – through its interrelating parts – we are able to identify with our ecological self.

#### **Our sensory world is a whole body experience**

When we perceive something, all our sensory systems participate together to give us integrated information of what calls us into relationship. We can see this in how we



Beneath the Surface

describe colours as warm or cold, sounds as harsh or soft.

Phenomenologist and deep ecologist David Abram describes this:

*"A raven soaring in the distance is not, for me, a mere visual image; as I follow it with my eyes, I inevitably feel the stretch and flex of its wings with my own muscles, and its sudden swoop toward the nearby trees is a visceral as well as visual experience for me."* <sup>2</sup>

This is called synaesthesia, and it weaves together our sense of the world into a whole-body experience. Even when we simply look at a stone in a dry river bed, our touch senses tell us of its smoothness, and our muscle stretch receptors tell us of its weight. Being aware of how our senses work together in this way can also deepen our perceptual capacities and sensuality, and enrich our sense of self arising from a whole-body experience in the world.

### **Perception blurs the boundaries of our self in relation to the other**

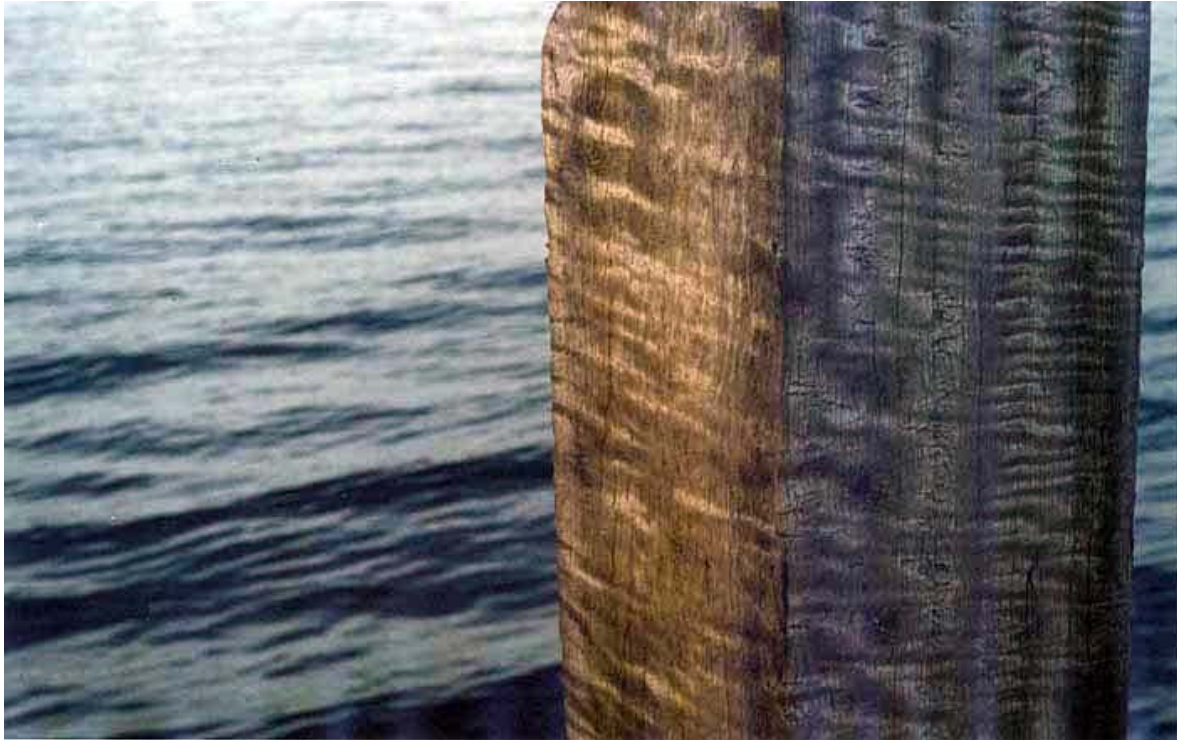
When you see the light from a distant star, where do you begin and the star end? In the sparks of the nerve cells in the back of your brain, in the excitation of light-sensitive molecules in your retina, or the soft, transparent cells of your cornea, in the cold winter air that bathes you, or at the outermost rays of the star, or out there in space, many millions of light years away in its fiery core?

The earliest theories about vision described how an ocular fire reached outwards from our eyes and lit up the seen object in front of us. It wasn't until much later in the development of medical science that seeing became an internal process of neuronal activity within our brain. While the act of seeing involves neuronal activity, this is just one part of the picture. Abram describes how seeing does not take place so much 'in' the visual cortex but 'out' in the relational field:

*"...My various senses, diverging as they do from a single coherent body, coherently converge, as well, in the perceived thing, just as the separate perspectives of my two eyes converge upon the raven and convene there into a single focus. ...My body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth."* <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2, 3</sup> Abram, *The spell of the sensuous* 1997 Random House



Waterwood

As we deepen into our senses, the separation between us, as an experiencing subject and the perceived as an object, diminishes. The perceiver is interdependent with the perceived. With deep intersubjectivity, both can be understood to be different aspects of the same alive field. We can only perceive because we are part of the same material world we are perceiving. We are the world perceiving itself, or the world is perceiving itself through us. We make sense of ourselves, and of the world, in the world. As we make sense of the world, it makes sense of us – and this is the holistic process of how we make sense of ourselves.

**Affinity is ground for relationship and resonance is a perceptual capacity**

We are also very much a material part of our larger body, Earth, in a relationship that is a dynamic and often rhythmic, interchange. The world moves through us in the air we exchange with each other, or in the food we eat and incorporate into our bodies, and in the waste we shit. The minerals that make up the bedrock beneath our feet, and found deep in the bowels of the Earth, are suspended in the fluid matrix of our bones, and death returns our physical form to the earth.

As we breathe out, the carbon dioxide we release is taken up by green leaves and used to grow. In turn, they give us the oxygen that we breathe in. Just like oxygen is needed for fire, it helps ignite the chemical reactions in our cells so that we can grow.

The waters of our body – blood and the fluid that bathes each and every one of our cells – are saline, like the ocean. Like a drop of water merges with the ocean, our fluid body is resonant with the fluid body of the earth. Our fluid body responds to the moon, it moves in tides. The cerebrospinal fluid that nourishes and cushions our brain and moves through the centre of our spinal cord and deep within caverns in our brain, is freshwater. The waters of the womb have the same content of dissolved gases as the primordial seas, before plants appeared on earth.

We are made up of the same elements that have existed for millennia, from before the Earth was formed – we are ancient, we are stardust! In any one moment, our physical existence holds past, present and future; a chemical ballet suspended in time within the living matrix of the wider system.

Perceiving sameness and affinity is good ground for building relationship, and resonance is an often overlooked form of sensing.



Heart Opening

**Perception is an active, receptive process of making sense.**

Rather than a simply passive, receptive process, perception is an active process of feeling that calls our imagination out to play and participate with the world around us. Our feelings, located in sensation, provide an interpretive layer to our experience. They lend meaning or sense to that which we perceive. By feelings I mean the continuous bodily sensitivity that interacts with our world, rather than emotions, which we can think of as our conscious interpretation of all our feelings at any one moment – known as the felt sense. Our felt sense forms the basis of our emotional intelligence.

Without having feeling about that which we are perceiving, it remains noise, image or sensation lacking in meaning. But we also need symbols to provide the framework for our feelings: The felt meaning is called forth by the symbols of what we perceive. By symbols I mean anything from the shape of a tree, to a particular sound, to the pencil line of a sketch, to a letter or word.

Meaning arises in the process of relationship between the perceiver and the symbols. When we read words, we project what we imagine we understand onto them to build up a picture of what they convey. It is this active mode of enquiry that allows us to understand the meaning of the words. When reading about a bowl of blackcurrants, the words may have given you an image, a tangy taste or even the delicious feel of a blackcurrant bursting on your tongue as you made sense of the words on the page.

We think nothing of hearing sounds and seeing images when we read a story, but what of our natural, perceptual capacities for reading symbols and narratives in the natural world of rocks, rhythms and rain? Our natural capacity to make sense of our world has been transferred to our capacity to read and write and we are now engrossed in a human-defined world. Instead of being in intelligent, participatory relationship with our encompassing earth, we are now immersed in a web of communications reflecting humanity back to ourselves, like a hall of mirrors, losing the reciprocity of relationship with our encompassing earth. Within this hall of mirrors, we are insensitive to the warning signs of ecological collapse, and disconnected from the implications of our way of life.



## Supporting ourselves to stay in touch

In a society where objectivity is over privileged and subjectivity is undervalued, authority figures call for objective, scientific or economic facts and delay action. The constant denial of our subjective experience in the world as a source of expertise can in itself be traumatic and disempowering. We need our emotional and subjective intelligence now more than ever.

Western culture tends to provide stimulation rather than encouraging sensitisation. One response to this is a numbing to over stimulation, such as that found in city life, on TV news, mainstream film and advertising, which in turn increase in intensity of stimulus in order to reach through the desensitisation of the modern individual.

In response to an experience that is too overwhelming to process and integrate as part of a person's life experience, the experience may be split: Through tissue patterns, psychological defences and emotional numbing, the person may separate out this experience in a process known as dissociation, to protect their sense of self and ability to function in the world – to survive the experience.

Humans are deeply sensitive and deeply interconnected beings. Perhaps most of us are aware, consciously or unconsciously, of the impacts of the way we live. The psychological and emotional splitting that we do to be part of everyday western culture, for example to catch a plane even though we know that the polar ice caps are disappearing at an alarming rate, is one form of dissociation. Dissociation is a basic survival strategy, but in this case – although it may be life preserving in the individual sense – with looming ecological collapse, it is clearly life threatening.



Amniosis

How do we cope with knowing that, in western culture, we all take part in the destruction of our natural world, whether that is forest destruction for the books we read, or the destruction of the health of the soil by industrial agriculture for the food we buy? We are just beginning to realise our collective power in changing the global climate and life on earth as we know it. To stay in touch with such painful knowledge requires a high level of resources to prevent it from overwhelming our sense that we – as individuals, let alone humanity – can survive as part of this wider whole and creating a sense of powerlessness to respond ecological and

social injustices. In many cases it may cause us to shut down our sensitivity to our relationship with our world or split from our experience, and so the patterns of denial, apathy and inertia are formed.

When distress, disempowerment or social conditioning close our hearts and minds to the destruction of our planet and its life-sustaining capacity, we become deadened, unable to respond in a healthy or creative way. We may become unable to act out of a basic hunger for justice, for physical safety or security – or even for a sense of future for ourselves let alone our generation's children or the other-than-human world. How do we support ourselves to stay open and in touch with the pain as well as the joy; the devastation and the beauty?

A perceptual practice honours our subjective experience: which empowers us to act from our subjective expertise and our emotional intelligence. Our senses evolved over many thousands of years in relation to the other than human world, and so enables us to connect with that ecological wisdom. A perceptual practice can also soften our cultural conditioning of dualism: such as in-here and out-there, subject and object. Deep listening is, in itself, healing (for the listener as well as the deeply heard) and a perceptual practice can be nourishing.

#### **Resilience and perceptual practice**

A perceptual practice can be as simple as reaching out to a rock with the same listening, knowing touch and intimacy that you would touch your own face, or co-meditating with a tree, or field of grass, to develop an awareness of the giving and receiving of breath. Taking time to stay with our perceptual experience while appreciating the subjectivity and permeating consciousness of the other-than-human world can develop our experiential knowing of our ecological self – a sense of being part of a wider whole. This kind of perceptual practice can enable us to hold our subjective knowing together with an experience of deep intersubjectivity with our encompassing earth.



**Before the Storm**

Being sensitive to our ecological self can bring suffering as well as joy, so it must also be sustainable and not overwhelming, as this only causes us to burn out, dissociate or shut down and lose our connection with our ecological self and our emotional intelligence. How do we grow our resilience?

Resources are essential to resilience. They are what we turn to for support, to stop us feeling overwhelmed, so that we can stay in touch with our embodied knowing. Resources can be people, places, skills, activities, or things. They can be as simple as a cup of tea, an essential oil, a walk in the woods, or they can be elaborate, like a support network or a set of skills. Knowing how we support ourselves and each other to stay in touch is vitally important and this also takes practice. Actively observing and learning what our resources are, making a list, and using them is a good start.

The word 'health' comes from the same Latin root as the word 'whole'. Living in connection with the world, with feeling and understanding of the impacts of our actions and inactions must be a deeply healthy way to be in the world. When we are alive in this way, our responses to our changing environment can be fluid and healthy.

The sudden burst of knowledge during the Copernican revolution challenged the embodied reality of people at the time. It must have been a major shock, threatening their sense of self and spiritual place in the world. The birth of reasoning, objective thinking that sparked the scientific revolution in the 1500s I think of as a significant one of the many bites humanity has taken of the apple from the Tree of Knowledge standing at the centre of the garden. And of course, in just the last 50–200 years, the industrial, agricultural and information revolutions have further changed the way we experience ourselves and the world.

As our self-consciousness continues to evolve, it may be the biggest tragedy that we wake up to our ecological self only to find we are looking at the consequences of our own destructive powers. But climate change – perhaps more than any of the environmental problems we have created – calls us to see our part in a global system; a whole of intricately responsive parts. Could it be that we, as part of a wider intelligent system now present ourselves with an incredible opportunity to discover our place in the world and live in touch with our ecological self?

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**All photos except Goddess of Lespugue, by Viola Sampson from an exhibition titled: Double Vision: Self Portraits of the Earth.**

## **FURTHER READING**

### **Core texts: perception, phenomenology, embodiment and ecopsychology**

David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* 1997 Random House

Andy Fisher, *Radical Ecopsychology: psychology in the service of life* 2002 Suny

Laura Sewall, *Sight and Sensibility* 1999 Tarcher/Putnam

### **Change in worldview and consciousness**

Richard Tarnas, *Cosmos and Psyche: Intimations of a new world view* 2006 Viking Penguin

### **Cranial Osteopathy, resonance, continuum movement practice**

Bonni Gintis, *Engaging the Movement of life* 2007 North Atlantic Books

### **The story of Adam and Eve**

Anne Baring, Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* 1993 Penguin Arkana

Steve Taylor, *The Fall: The insanity of the ego in human history and the dawning of a new era* 2005 O Books