



The Nectar of Gaia

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"John Steele is an Archaeologist and an aromatic consultant. In his work, he explores ways of creatively integrating these two domains. He earned a master's degree in Dramatic Arts and a Ph.D. in Anthropology/Archaeology Research, from the University of California, Berkeley. He has lectured extensively throughout the country and in Europe. He is on the Board of Directors of the American Aromatherapy Association and has just co-authored a book entitled, 'Earthmind,' published by Harper & Row."

This presentation combines threads of my aromatic, psychological and archaeological research. I will try to weave them together in a tapestry of mutually enhancing perspective. Although I am an aromatic consultant for custom blended perfume and body oils and environmental fragrancing projects, I am also an archaeologist with a passion for exploring ancient civilizations.

I have recently returned to California after living twelve years in England, where I was a co-founder of "The Dragon Project." This project was a multidisciplinary scientific investigation of subtle Earth-energy phenomena, such as ultrasonics, geomagnetism and ambient radioactivity at Rollright stone circle, a Bronze Age (2500 BC) monument in Oxfordshire. There are 900 stone circles in the British Isles, of which Stonehenge on the Salisbury Plain is the most eminent.

My focus on the project was to investigate how these energies affect altered states of human consciousness such as clairvoyance, dreaming or healing. I developed a sensory psychology approach to explore the mindset of the builders of these enigmatic ancient monuments. The world view of each age is based on the use ratios—the relative strengths and weaknesses—of the five senses. Each new technological innovation shifts these sensory ratios. As one sense becomes dominant others become diminished. For example, today we are heavily biased toward vision, whereas in earlier hunting and gathering so-

cieties smell was relied upon to a greater degree.

The title of this talk is "The Nectar of Gaia." Nectar refers to the natural botanical aromatic oils exuded by flowers, herbs and trees. Gaia was the ancient Greek Goddess of the Earth. In the Homeric Hymn XXX we read that the Earth is the "mother of all, eldest of all beings."¹ And this is where we shall begin with the Earth. The relevance of this theme is obvious because of the Earth Day celebrations, April 22, which was observed by over 130 countries. I have just co-authored a book, *Earthmind*,² which explores many of the subjects covered in this lecture.

The Gaia Hypothesis

In 1979 James Lovelock, a radical English scientist, revolutionized the Earth sciences with the Gaia Hypothesis which states that the Earth is a colossal living and self-regulating organism.³ This echoes the worldwide belief of ancient cultures that the Earth was alive—that it was intelligent, sentient and responsive to human consciousness. It is no accident that this insight arises in the midst of our current global environmental crisis. *Time* magazine recently devoted an entire issue to "The Planet of the Year—our Endangered Earth."⁴

Lovelock's hypothesis is a new paradigm, a new model of reality, of comparable stature to the rise of Seventeenth Century Newtonian science or Einstein's theory of relativity. An independent scientist, Lovelock is unattached to any university or government agency. As an inventor of the electron capture detector, he was instrumental in starting the environmental movement. This sensitive device provided the data base for pesticides, such as DDT that were building up to toxic levels in foods, animals and people. He used this same instrument to monitor the erosion of the Earth's ozone layer by chlorofluorocarbons.

In 1965 he was invited to work on NASA's first lunar instrument mission and later on the Viking Mars probes. His task was to determine how life would be recognized on another planet. Lovelock's insight was to envision a



plant's atmosphere as a conveyor belt for raw materials and waste products of life processes.

He compared the near equilibrium atmosphere of a dead planet such as Mars or Venus, and the vibrant far from equilibrium atmosphere such as the Earth. Infrared telescopes can analyze the chemical composition of planetary atmospheres across the immensity of space. They revealed that the Earth's atmosphere was remarkably unusual: highly reactive gases, such as methane and oxygen, were coexisting without reacting. Further there was no entropic decline towards equilibrium in the Earth's atmosphere. This could have never happened by chance on a lifeless planet. It was evident that the disequilibrium of the atmosphere, a constant recycling of unstable gases, was indicative of life on planet Earth.⁵

Furthermore, Lovelock found evidence of several other geophysiological regulatory mechanisms at work: temperature, oxygen, nitrogen, methane, ammonia and salinity were all amazingly maintained in ranges that were optimal for life over millions of years. He deduced that there must be a super-regulatory organism, coordinating all the other regulatory mechanisms. Lovelock called this entity Gaia, also known as Ge, from which root geology and geography also derive their names.⁶

In summary, Lovelock defined Gaia as a "complex entity involving the Earth's biosphere, from whales to viruses and from oaks to algae, atmosphere, oceans, soil; the totality constituting a feedback or cybernetic system which seeks an optimal physical and chemical environment for life on this planet."⁷

Geomancy

As I mentioned, ancient cultures also believed that the Earth was a great living organism. Throughout the archaic world Gaia was venerated, under many names and guises, as the source of fertility, healing, and prophecy. In this context, geomancy was the art of appropriate relationship between people and their environment—where to locate villages, sacred places and ancestral tombs for the greatest ecological and spiritual harmony.

Geomancy is a sensitivity to the Earth's body language, to that which D. H. Lawrence called the spirit of place. "Every people," he wrote, "is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the Earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: Call it what you like, but the spirit of place is a great reality."⁸

In simple practical terms, geomancy is your sense of place—where it feels good for you to be in the environment: where to live, where you choose a spot for a picnic or a place to sit in a room.

In ancient China, geomancy was known as Feng Shui. It is still practiced today in Taiwan. Geomancers are consulted to locate the most beneficial places in order to

promote fertility, prosperity and harmony for homes, businesses, hospitals, temples and seats of government. Within this tradition, Ch'i means vital energy or the breath of nature.

Feng Shui was the art of harmonizing the Ch'i of the land with the Ch'i of humanity so that both benefited. Ch'i is invisible. But there is a visible effect of Ch'i which is called Li. The original image of Li in Chinese thought was the visible manifestation of the wind in the swaying patterns in fields of grain or the rippling patterns of breeze on a lake.

The Li of Fragrance

It is through Li, dynamic organic pattern, that we enter the aesthetic experience of perception. A few more examples will clarify this idea. Li is the organic pattern found in the grain of cypress wood, the petals of a rose, the veins in a piece of jade, the melody of a flute, the laminar flow of water around a rock in a stream, the patterns of your finger tip whorls, or the way a beautiful head of hair cascades. It is an innate sense of harmonic form which is often undulatory, asymmetric and never exactly repeating itself with an infinite variations on a theme. In nature, it is also exemplified in the shape of mountains, rivers, trees and clouds in the landscape paintings of The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).⁹

Many of us collect beautiful stones, shells, driftwood, feathers, or flowers that we find on walks. For each of our five senses, there is a corresponding quality of Li in both nature and art which sympathetically resonates in us as a subtle "wake-up call" to transcendent reality.

The Li of Fragrance is expressed in olfactory sonatas, fugues or symphonies that delight, intrigue or illuminate the spirit. Sometimes this experience can take your breath away when you savor the depth of an exquisite fragrance instead of your sensory attention hurrying across the surface of habituated perception.

The Li of Fragrance reveals the hidden depths of things beneath their visual surface. At the same time, it elicits from our deepest selves' insights that we might never have known.

Because of urban air pollution in the Twentieth Century we are shallow breathers, but when walking by night-blooming jasmine at dusk, we automatically pause and breathe deeper to appreciate the intoxicating beauty of the scent. We might have a similar experience in a grove of orange trees in blossom or while walking through a pine forest. Our breath reacts to pleasant or unpleasant fragrance.

In the Eastern meditative traditions, it is said that mind follows breath, therefore, deep fluid breath will give rise to a peaceful state of mind. Thus, the use of inspiring and purifying incense in these disciplines. The Li of Fragrance represents an expanded geomantic awareness to the olfactory environment.



Geomantic Amnesia

Today we are dulled by a geomantic amnesia, a collective state of mind which occurs when a culture forgets the geomantic connection with their landscape and cannot comprehend the global effects of this forgetting.

This amnesia is a symptom of the age that we live in, which in Indian cosmology is called the Kali Yuga—one of the meanings of which is “the dregs of time.” It means that we live in an era of such a high temporal density or events per unit of time in daily life that people cannot cope: telephone call to make, letters to write, bills to pay, family to spend time with, friends to see, driving, shopping and maintaining all of our possessions. Geomantic amnesia arises from the belief that the Earth is lifeless and infinitely exploitable.

It arises in part from the worldwide suppression of the ancient Goddess cultures, about which more will be said later. With the high temporal density, we rarely have time to experience the depth, the Li of the senses. Sensory atrophy gradually induces geomantic amnesia. We are simply out of touch with both ourselves and Gaia. Our sensory use ratios, so heavily biased toward the visual, are out of balance. Sacred sites, such as the stonewall circles I mentioned, were built as geomantic monuments to help us remember to wake up when we fall asleep in what Marshall McLuhan called “the cultural trance.”

Chemotyped Essential Oils

Nature, however, does not forget. Aromatic plants always respond to the “spirit of place,” to the geomancy of a particular landscape. For example, in the south of France different genes, enzymes and aromatic molecules of thyme (*Thymus vulgaris*) are activated corresponding to the altitude at which they grow.¹⁰ Each altitude, ranging from sea level to the mountains, is characterized by a specific local environment of soil, water, light, insects and micro-organisms. This results in seven genetically identical chemotypes of thyme with different scents and medical properties.

For example, at sea level in St. Tropez where there is an abundance of infrared light, the thyme will be very rich in phenols—a very harsh, aggressive scent. Whereas the mountain thyme absorbs blue and ultraviolet wave lengths giving a very sweet gentle essence, rich in alcohols such as linalol. Although these two chemotypes have different bouquets and medical properties, botanically the two plants are identical.

This theory was developed by Pierre Franchomme, a pioneering French biochemist and herbalist. It is fascinating that natural botanical aromatic oils, on which the fragrance industry was founded, are also the sources of the plant's medical potency.¹¹

It is important to introduce the dimension of Gaia into the fragrance equation. Often both perfumers and aromatherapists tend to think of these essential oils in a

rather abstract manner, as though they only existed in a distilled form in brown amber bottles, forgetting that they are the exquisite products of an amazing network of geophysiological processes such as climate and photosynthesis.

Fragrance Trends: A Return to the Past, Magic and the Earth

In a perceptive article on fragrance trends, social fragrance researchers Mensing and Beck, explore the roots and indications of the current trend, which they call “magic fantasy.”¹² From mid-1986, they observe that as a result of anxiety about the future, which is typical of rapidly developing high technology and high temporal density societies, people search for a long-lost wisdom of the distant past which will transform their lives by giving them more meaning.

This reorientation to the past is an attempt to awaken from geomantic amnesia. In this quest for intuitive knowledge our new sense of body awareness is complimented by a preference for natural foods, fragrances and materials.

Mensing and Beck talk about a harkening back to the medieval period, but now in 1990, as we rush even faster into the future, an even more profound sense of archaic revival stretches all the way back to the prehistorical shamanism of primitive rain forest, mountain, desert and island peoples. The more technologically advanced a culture is, the more deeply does it search its past for a clue to the future.¹³

Shamanism is the worldwide transformational technology which utilized controlled access to ecstasy for healing, weather control, divination of food sources, enemies, and deep communication with the plants, animals, spirits, and the land itself. It is based on a profound geomantic kinship to the Earth.

Shamans were spiritual ecologists. They were the first sensory psychologists and masters of curing herbs and fragrance. Today there is an increasing awareness of shamanic cultures which is linked to the environmental crisis, such as the destruction of the Amazonian tropical rain forests.

Mensing and Beck also talk about the images of certain perfumes which they believe are “created for women who want the power of witchcraft.” Such a woman they think “will seek appropriate aesthetic products, through which she can attain the feeling of supernatural power.”¹⁴ They further remark that recently fragrance users interested in aromatherapy have inquired if there were any essences through which they could possess such power.¹⁵

Mensing and Beck see the need of “a new generation of complex-sensual-oriental notes which must be viewed against the backdrop of the desire to experience magic and the supernatural.”¹⁶ In this context, fragrance becomes a vehicle for consciousness expansion transport-



ing the user into uncharted realms of power and imagination.

But witchcraft, in turn, is based on the even more ancient Paleolithic and Neolithic worldwide Goddess traditions. In this matriarchal tradition which preceded patriarchal societies, the Goddess was not the Hollywood stereotype of an alluring stereotype like Marilyn Monroe or Madonna. Rather the Goddess, who was known by many names in many countries, was in fact a triple Goddess based on the biological life cycle of women: the young virgin maiden, the pregnant mother, and the wise old crone. This, in turn, was based upon the three phases of the moon: waxing, full and waning. It was the Goddess of Earth that empowered the eternal cycle of birth, life, death and regeneration of life in nature. There is a profound revival of Goddess beliefs today among women of many different traditions.

In all of these trends relating to an archaic revival, I concur with Mensing and Beck that "the search for a new connection with the Earth itself is the central aspect." It is the factor, they conclude "which will have the greatest impact on the aesthetic field during the coming years."¹⁷ They observe in the "cosmetic and perfume areas we can also see the first indications of interest in this new trend: natural cosmetics, Earth colors in make up and the depiction of nature in make up, and the introduction of perfumes with natural, aromatherapy images."¹⁸ All of these factors reflect the aesthetic facets of the Green Revolution.

Aromachology

In concluding, there is another facet of the Green Revolution that I would like to mention. Pardon the play on words, but I am now talking of the pioneering work of Annette Green of The Fragrance Foundation. There is no doubt that aromachology, the new science that she describes as "combining the interrelationships of psychology and the latest in fragrance technology" is the way of the future. It will be complimented by the insights of psycho-aromatherapy which researches mood shifts in response to natural botanical oils.¹⁹

Aromachology will be the foundation of environmental fragancing of public, working and living spaces—hotels, hospitals, theaters, stores, waiting rooms and homes. It will also be increasingly applied in mental health and in vigilance tasks, such as air-traffic controllers. Ms. Green remarked that "the role of the sensory psychologist will become crucially important in fragrance development."²⁰

Furthermore, I foresee that aromachology will be utilized in expanding the educational curriculum of our children to awaken them from the slumber of sensory amnesia. This will have the effect of enhancing their geomantic awareness.

I am very pleased that The Fragrance Foundation is

also sponsoring "Summit 2000—Preparing for the First Global Civilization." This multidisciplinary think tank will include the environmental and ecological aspects of the emergent civilization.

As the fragrance renaissance continues to flower, illustrated by the great success of Aromatherapy 1990, the Third Annual Convention and Trade Show of the American Aromatherapy Association in Santa Monica, let us ensure that Gaia, the Earth, this fragile but enchanted planet who gives us the nectar of her botanical perfumes, is not forgotten as we enter the last decade of this millennium. It has been an honor to share these ideas with you.

References

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3. J Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford University Press (1979). Also see his recent work *The Ages of Gaia*, W W Norton & Co (1988).
4. *Time*, January 2, 1989.
5. J Lovelock, *The Evolving Gaia Hypothesis*, in: *Proceedings of the Conference "Is the Earth a Living Organism?"* held at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Published by the National Audubon Expedition Institute, Sharon, CT (1985).
6. J Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, op.cit.
7. *Ibid.*
8. D H Lawrence, *Studies in Classical American Literature*, Thomas Seltzer (1923).
9. The Ming Dynasty style of painting, in turn, is a revival of the Song Dynasty style (960-1279) which itself owes an aesthetic debt to music dating back to the Confucian thought of the fifth century B.C. The musical terminology of top, middle and base notes still influences the aesthetics of aromatic blending. Some of this discussion on Li was published in an article I wrote, "Reflections of an Aromatic Archaeologist" for the *International Journal of Aromatherapy* (Spring 1990).
10. There are at least 50 different species of thyme.
11. Dr D Penoel, a leading French medical aromatherapist has extensively experimented with chemotyped essential oils in his practice. There are over 150 different chemotyped oils.
12. J Mensing and C Beck, *The Psychology of Fragrance Selection* in: *Perfumery: The Psychology and Biology of Fragrance*, edited by S Van Toller and G Dodd, Chapman and Hall (1988).
13. For example, in the film "Star Wars", the shamanic Ch'i "Force" conquers the hi-tech Darth Vader.
14. J Mensing and C Beck, op.cit.
15. S Cunningham, *Magical Aromatherapy*, Llewellyn Publications (1990).
16. J Mensing and C Beck, op.cit.
17. *Ibid.*
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**Jack Funesti, Flavor Scents; with Howard Robinson
and Mike Twitty, Colgate Palmolive**

**Speakers John Steele, Lifetree Aromatix; with
Christine Malcolm, Santa Fe Fragrances**

**Nevine Thometz of Jean LaPorte with Hugh Spencer,
Donna Belthoff, and Carl Schubert of Florasynth**

**Joy Andrews, Andrew Jurgens; and Bob Belstrom,
Henkel**

**Joe Il Vento, Roure; with Bill Whitehead, Procter &
Gamble**

Naomi White and Ray Ramanauskas, Felton