

Developing a Qualitative Understanding of Nature: Animals, Humanity, and Evolution

This year's week-long winter course in February was attended primarily by young farmers and apprentices. They brought a quiet interest and an openness to engage in the different activities. Our courses sometimes surprise participants since it is not at all clear at first why, for example, a course related to agriculture should have one session each day that involves doing projective geometry. And so it was this year, but by the end of the week a number of participants wrote that this was their favorite part of the course! Why? Because, I think, it was new and unusual, it involved individuals in the activity of drawing, it challenged thinking in unexpected ways, and then, at the very end, it forged some mind-stretching connections to the work in other sessions.

When we plan such a course, Henrike and I do not necessarily know what kind of connections between the work in geometry and the work in biology will appear. The idea is to explore deeply in two directions and then see what reveals itself. The revelations and insights come only out of the process and they are often surprising to us as well.

One important idea that developed in the geometry this year was that every finite form is related to a particular structuring of the whole of space. Nothing is truly separate. Every form is always, through and through, related to a larger whole. This idea grew in potency as we considered animal forms and the relation of animals to the human being in evolution. We could truly begin to sense not only the uniqueness of cow, pig,

and horse, but also the interconnectedness of life forms in a deep and expansive way. We saw that, as human beings, we have the ability to let every other being come to expression in us. We are connected with the whole of life. How seriously do we take this fact? What can we do to bring our own intentions into a healthier relation to the beings with which we are connected? CH

In their written evaluations of the course, two farm apprentices explained how the different activities “held together” for them:

“I can tell this course was planned out very thoughtfully and intentionally. Unlike my educational experience growing up, I was able to connect the different activities and lectures, and that helped my understanding. My intellect and spirit have both been stimulated, refreshed, and challenged.”

“This week has been a breath of fresh air, a nuanced and sensible building-up of a cohesive and sensitive worldview from which anyone could benefit, regardless of their inclination toward the particularities of faith and philosophy that led to it. Overall, a nice balance of instruction and interaction, observation and creativity, tangible and abstract, although I would not object to more time spent on animals (either in general or particular). Discussion of domesticity especially interesting and informative.”

