

Dear Friends,

In the inaugural issue of *In Context* twenty years ago, we wrote about the difficulties in describing the kind of science our new Institute intended to pursue. Among the descriptive phrases we considered were these:

- Holistic science
- Goethean science
- Phenomena-centered science
- Qualitative science
- Participative science
- Contextual science

There is no one “right” choice, and we have tended to employ many different descriptive terms, despite the fact that almost any description will seem problematic in an environment so thoroughly shaped by the reigning abstract and quantitatively biased science of today. But perhaps no term has occurred more frequently in this publication than the especially problematic “Goethean science” — problematic if only because it is so foreign both to the general public and the scientific community. But at least its unfamiliarity may open a space of receptivity in the hearer, allowing a new understanding to arise that is not already prejudiced by the abuses that have colored, or miscolored, a phrase such as “holistic science.”

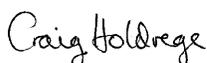
In this issue of *In Context* we might be seen as coming full circle to address the questions about “Goethean science” raised twenty years ago. Actually, we suspect that many issues of the newsletter might be seen that way. Questions about the nature of the unconventional science we try to explore are, after all, always needing to be addressed in our work precisely because the work is so unconventional. But it is true that in this current newsletter the matter of scientific method looms especially large. It becomes fully explicit in our Notes and Reviews article, “A Fresh Take on the Goethean Approach.” The central observations in this note (which are the basis for a few reflections by Craig) came from a thoughtful scientific colleague residing in Europe.

Then there is the feature article, “Goal-Directed Activity in Life,” which we have taken from a 1945 book by E. S. Russell. Russell was a Scottish biologist who spent a lifetime reflecting upon the distinctive character of living beings, and whose own work illustrated so wonderfully how one’s scientific method can sketch this character. He would hardly have called himself a “Goethean scientist,” given the absence of that phrase in his day, but his work was nothing if not holistic, context-centered, qualitative, and phenomena-based. The key thing for Russell was to observe the actual behavior of organisms, and then refuse to ignore the “purposive” and “goal-directed” (he often said “directive”) nature of that activity.

Starting with, and staying close to, phenomena in one’s scientific work — including in one’s theorizing — is, of course, at the heart of a phenomena-based science. This is why Steve, in preparing a new book about the nature of organisms and about the implications of this nature for evolution, begins the book with a chapter containing vignettes drawn from the life of various organisms. That chapter (“Scenes of Life”) is included here alongside the piece by Russell.

We hope, then, that this issue of *In Context* provides interested readers with rich opportunities for noticing the special features of living creatures, and also for working toward an ever more systematic, disciplined, qualitative (and Goethean!) understanding of living phenomena.

Craig Holdrege



Steve Talbott



The Nature Institute

STAFF

Linda Bolluyt
Colleen Cordes
Craig Holdrege
Henrike Holdrege
Seth Jordan
Veronica Madey
Stephen L. Talbott

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EDITOR: Stephen L. Talbott

LAYOUT: Mary Giddens

COVER ART: Kristelle Esterhuizen

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The Nature Institute
20 May Hill Road
Ghent, New York 12075
Tel.: 518-672-0116
Fax: 518-672-4270
Email: info@natureinstitute.org
Web: <http://natureinstitute.org>

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