

Kosmos Live — Episode 9 | Andreas Weber, *On Matter and Desire*

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This is Kosmos Live, and I am your host Rhonda Fabian.

Well, the profound changes that are coming are the profound changes that are happening in every process of identity, which is every life form all the time. In a very difficult and astonishing way, well let's say the profound changes or even this sadness of goodbye or this sadness of loss which is englobing us is just a variant of the sadness of loss which happens if you are fully alive.

That's Berlin-based biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber.

He is working to re-evaluate our understanding of the biosphere as a meaning-creating and poetic reality. His latest book, *Matter and Desire*, explores ecology as a tender practice of forging relationships, of yearning for connections, and of expressing these desires through our bodies.

Welcome to Kosmos Live Andreas.

Thanks Rhonda.

KOSMOS | So many times reading your book *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology*, I'm reminded how nature speaks to us in every moment in a language both familiar and forgotten. How do you think nature is speaking to us in these troubled times?

First, thanks for getting me so nicely. I really feel you nail what I want to say when you say it's language familiar and forgotten. It's a language which we always, we are able to speak from the beginning because we are living bodies as all the other beings are living bodies and at the same time we are taught, I'd say we are taught that other living beings are machines or computers at best or dead matter or mechanisms and normally we don't really believe ourselves when our senses and our sensitive skin and our desire for a way to get into contact with others tell us that there is a communication happening.

KOSMOS | It seems we once had a spiritual intimacy with other species. What do you think happened?

Yeah, I mean, that's the predicament of our civilization actually you're getting at. I am convinced that every living being is able to understand on a very basic level what it means to be alive and that's being alive as a sentient and feeling body... We need to look at the history of our idea of making a better world, of dominating that which is not human in order to grant humans or humanness a better place.

It has to do with a desire to conquer that which cannot be controlled, and ultimately it has to do with the desire of Western civilization to get rid of death, which for sure isn't possible but which in a way is our obsession but getting away with death, getting rid of it means to get rid of our sensitive and even erotic body and that's the drama we are in at the moment.

KOSMOS | I wonder if you would share with us, Andreas, a brief passage from the beginning of the book. You speak so beautifully about the swifts and ... Well, would you read that and we could talk about it?

Absolutely, I'd love to, I'd love to, yeah. You need to excuse my German accent actually. When I read it, it might be more visible to myself. I'm reading to you a passage which I found when I spent summer and in a tiny village in the Apennine mountains in the middle of Italy where I had my second home for a couple of years, now I don't have it anymore. There I learned a lot about the living world as a world of mutuality and relationship.

“The swifts inhabit the air as sunlit froth, as though the old castle were a cliff, surrounded by the swell and surge of the sea. One animal after another plummets toward the walls and turns away in the last tenth of a second, leaning into the turn like a pilot flying a death-defying acrobatic maneuver. Or rather, the other way around: The pilot flying the maneuver turns like the playful swift. Our gaze moves skyward and does not turn away, seized by the birds’ dynamism.

“Our necks bent to follow their curves, circles, and arcs, our eyes sucked upward into the chasing loop-the-loops and fleeing chicaneries of wind-taut bodies, nothing but wings, curving blades that cut tracks into the fabric of the sky. Speechless and humble as our limbs tingle with the joy of life, our gaze is an homage. The birds’ infectious happiness is their trust in the air’s capacity to carry them, the air’s power to be void and thereby to support.”

KOSMOS | So, so beautiful. It takes a poetic consciousness to capture just the reality of a scene like that. It just makes me wonder, do you consider yourself a biologist or a poet?

Well, I'm considering myself both, and actually I'm considering myself as a biologist because I am a poet, so I think that's the forgotten side of biology actually. That's the side that every being is expressive of inwardness and this is something we know and this is something that draws people to get into contact with other living beings and even to study biology.

Then when you study biology you slowly unlearn this first motivation of yourself or you unlearn the love for life and substitute it with something much more technical. What I did here, and maybe it's a kind of paradigmatic passage, because I really tried to show that everything visible and physical and palpable and graspable has not only an outside, but also and always has a meaningful inside and through this the world isn't just a place where stuff is happening, but the world is always also an interior and a stage for meaningfulness:

I would say that the world itself is an inside waiting to express itself, and living beings are a way of making this inside visible and communicate it. That's actually what I experience myself and that's what I search and that's what I try to express when I talk about other living beings.

We have this huge abyss in the middle of our different cultures which I feel has to do with the fact that we are in this environmental crisis and we're losing other life forms and we don't understand ourselves and we don't understand our feelings. I think it's absolutely important to take serious our own personal experiences of being connected through emotion and through expression and I just try to retrace them.

BREAK 1

KOSMOS | I love how you speak about how poetic logic or poetry has its own form of precision. I have a quote here “which always” you say quote “emerges from contradiction and is the basic

magic of life. It unleashes the imaginative power by which something simultaneously is and is also its opposite.” That really caught me and I can't say exactly why but it has something to do with this sense of ourselves as binary beings somehow suspended or caught between these extremes or these contradictions:

No, it's a deeply important point actually and I can ... Let me just go into your direction and put it a little bit further what you started to say if you allow me.

KOSMOS | Yes, please.

We know that, let's say a logic of contradiction or a fashion of contradiction is more the style of Eastern spirituality or philosophies and we know there's these Zen sayings which to our Western ears are strangely beautiful but also a little bit weird because they're contradictory. I'm not a scholar of Eastern philosophy and I'm not one of these people who were deeply fascinated by this and then started there.

Let me just remind you that when I talk about contradictions and organisms we are made of matter as we know. We are made of these, let's say tiny bits of stuff or these quanta of energy, however you take it. These things which have a natural tendency just to just to burn and then lie there and do nothing. That's what the physicists know. This is what happens to the universe, so it's just, there's a tendency in this matter just to rest.

On the other hand, organisms are doing the opposite of this. There is some kind of strange, well let's call it desire or tendency which binds together matter which just wants to rest and makes it dance and there's already a contradiction. Then we have another contradiction in the fact that this matter I'm talking about, it's never the possession of an organism. The matter you're made of is not yours. It's completely shared with everything else on this world.

While you are sitting here now and while you're breathing, you're giving off CO₂ carbon dioxide, which makes the earth warmer and the carbon inside the CO₂, this is your body actually. We don't have any real identity.

Metabolism means to recreate one cell at any moment from stuff which I don't own, and then give up that which is me to the world and which I don't own again.

In a way we are totally this world, we are the whole of this world because materially we are just the world, and on the other hand we have this meaningfulness which comes with the fact that we always strive to create our own identities.

KOSMOS | I want to speak to one thing and that is how this actually does relate in some ways to Eastern thought that there is a misconception about this idea that we and our senses are illusions devoid of existence whereas in fact I think like my teacher Thich Nhat Hanh would say, we live in a state of interbeing and that instead we and our senses are empty of self-existence, a separate existence. I think that's a huge distinction and that's what I love about your work is that you bring the sense of Interbeing.

Yeah. I mean, I love teacher Thich Nhat Hanh—I deeply admire him, so that's good to know that he was your teacher. I actually think that we are in no, let's say no spiritual tradition we ever have reached the end of thinking, so why not go and put a new light on certain old or even eastern spiritual traditions from a new vantage point of self understanding.

The beauty of this is that we have this fundamental interbeing which then gives rise to selfhood, which then is again only possible by a fundamental interbeing. I mean, I can try to explain this in a little bit more concrete terms. That's the advantage to be a biologist. I always have an example from biology.

In an ecosystem, every being can only exist because it can eat others and it is eaten by others. We have the idea of fundamental interbeing as completely sharing your bodies with others, which you could see as cruelty, but you can also see it as a source of fertility. Only this makes possible that any individual and any selfhood can exist. You need both, and that's another way of talking about the paradoxes I'm talking about in this book. That you need the totality of mutual, how would I call it, of mutual interdependency or interpenetration. You need this to be a self. You need to incorporate other to be a self.

You can only be a self if you give yourself away to other and that's one of the main messages of this book actually, that in every relationship we need to consider that we can be ourselves only through making the other flourish and otherwise we can't be ourselves.

We have a fundamental deep interdependency in every relationship, which is an ecological fact but which is also a future for realities, so it's a spiritual principle to my eyes and it's a paradox. Our western society at the moment don't believe in this paradox. It's about enhance yourself to the detriment of others. That's the idea of competing and of being more efficient. This is just not how the world works. The world works in the way that I can only be myself if I become myself through the exchange with others.

KOSMOS | I think you say it so beautifully when you mention in the book that we gain meaning through feeling and you say, "Feeling means that one piece of the world folds in another calling forth an order that contains both and neither because it is something altogether different." That seems to me a pretty good definition of love.

Yes, yes, thanks. Thanks, you just spotted it.

KOSMOS | Really beautiful.

The idea that I can be myself through letting the other be herself and to my own eyes is the outline of a practice of love. What I find so fascinating is that we can see this practice of loving already in the way an ecosystem functions as I explained. In an ecosystem, a single being can only be because it is able to transform itself into the whole ecosystem. It gives itself away.

The result of this mutual transformation, which means a self can only be if it opens up to other totally. The result is that all the beauty of an ecosystem, all the beauty of the flowering meadow of the may in this part of Italy with all that richness. To my eyes we can walk into love as something which is happening as a practice of sharing life between beings, and that's actually ecology from a different standpoint, and that's why it is so meaningful to us.

On the other hand, it's something we can learn for ourselves. We can try to or we should try to think, "Okay, how can we, how can we establish an ecology of love as a practice of mutual nourishing?" How can we do this in a relationship? And then we find that this structure of, "I grow because I grant you growth"—that's actually the core of any truly happy experience of personal love. That's what happens when I give something to my child so that she can flourish. That makes me bigger.

We can implement an ecology of love in our relationships which is not different at all from what is happening in ecosystems, only that we can be, let's say, the actors in that practice. That's even the core message of the whole book is that we have completely forgotten that to be in this world in a fertile and

fruitful manner means to be a loving partner of others, and being a loving partner for others means to come to myself through letting the others come to themselves.

BREAK 2

KOSMOS | Let me speak to the biologist for a moment and say, it's really both the poet and the biology. Everything is both I guess, but as we unravel the mysteries of DNA and with our increased understanding of the natural cycles on earth and in the Kosmos, do you feel that there is a sort of unbreakable code of creation itself and if so, what does it imply for us as humans? Are we just a random expression of the universe unwinding or are we a grace note somehow in the vast symphony of reality?

Thanks. A very good question. Yeah, I mean, it's interesting when you say the universe unwinding. What does that mean, the universe unwinding? Maybe I'd start there. Actually as you already could realize, I'm convinced that the unfolding reality or the unwinding universe is a process of expressing a desire to be in touch and in contact and to experience oneself as a self. To my eyes there is a profound desire to establish connections which is the center of this reality and which happens on so many different levels.

We do this in our human way and atoms do this in the way atoms do it. I would say that looking at what happened like we understand it from the singularity that we call Big Bang, there was a differentiation of something which was just one, which was just oneness. Obviously, there was the interest to differentiate or to rupture or to get out of touch with oneself and then to immensely desire connection. When we put together oxygen and hydrogen and we see that these two atoms just love to be water, H₂O, we see that there's a tendency to explore and to connect and to be curious on that level already.

It's a tremendous intensification of the desire to connect which to my eyes already characterizes any kind of matter or energy or what there is.

As humans we are part of this and on the other hand we have this specific quality of being witness to what happens. From there comes the responsibility to understand the direction of this cosmic unfolding and not to destroy this.

I mean, we make a difference by the fact that we are so powerful and we can do something which favors interbeing like Hanh said, or which blocks it and I think that's actually the choice we need to take as a civilization.

KOSMOS | Wonderful. Andreas, would you read us another passage from your book?

I'd love to.

KOSMOS | I love the chapter on transformation. I think it's my favorite.

It's the center actually. Just because I see the quote I put in front of it and just before I read, this brings me back to what we've been talking about before when we were talking about paradox and the beautiful observation by Simone Weil the French communist and Catholic and mystic, this very enigmatic woman Simone Weil who observed who said "every separation is a link or every link is a separation." That's the motto of this, the whole chapter on transformation is set in.

“I remember an evening from 2013, when the summer had just begun. It was a still evening, an evening without wind, when the day's warmth seemed not to want to leave the air, as though the mildness of the coming summer were flowing into the world and filling it to the brim in the darkness.

“It was also a special evening because in its solemn stillness I heard the nightingale sing again for the first time. The nightingale, the magical being of transformation whose voice can enchant the whole world, as though everything were suddenly transformed into some new material, as though things were made of chiming glass and the air of red velvet cloth beneath an immense bell. The nightingale, oh! that wonderful bird, which I could write a whole new book about every spring. The nightingale, that tiny creature weighing just a few grams, practically immaterial, purely voice.

“On that evening, its world-altering power overwhelmed me with a feeling of wonder and gratitude. I also felt melancholy for the already certain transient of our encounter. My heart pounded as I grasped how much I love this little bird, how much my soul was attached to it, how much my feeling was changed by the touch of its tones.”

Let me just read the next paragraph because then I can get into what I think about transformation just to carry on this.

“And my heart beat faster as I understood that all emotional encounters inevitably transform us. All relationships are transformations that leave both me and world change by one another, encounters in which one penetrates the other and leaves it altogether different than it was before. Everything changes when we engage with it in emotional contact. No encounter leaves us the same. We cannot be neutral. We are always already swept up.”

KOSMOS | So lovely, thank you. I think many of us have experienced that moment of deep connection and transcendence, moments of uplift and aliveness, and yet for many of us, for most of us I guess they are so fleeting and they evaporate like the dew. What do these universal moments teach us and what did that moment mean to you?

What I was feeling is that what is happening with us being selves with feelings and with emotions is that through these emotions we are also influencing the world. One of the firm beliefs—which is still like far from mainstream belief—is that there is an exterior world, which is an exterior world which can be treated according to the laws of exteriority and physics and technology and there's an interior world which is only in our minds and in our brains and which cannot change the outer world in a way.

I just wanted to show with this ... I mean, I tried to show in this chapter that this is actually not the reality of living beings. In living beings these two worlds are always intermixed. They are always one aspect of the other. Already the nightingale with her the wearingly beautiful song, it's an outside but it affects myself in my inwardness and obviously it's also an expression of inwardness of the nightingale's inwardness, which isn't a sentimental feeling but it's still a desire to express its selfhood through song.

This then has a consequence in my actions. I act differently and this leaves a trace in the world. The huge premise of how could you call it, of modernity that our inner lives are kind of private and not really relevant and there are projections and there are just like only interesting to ourselves or they are only stories. To my eyes this is just not true but because we are living in a world which is all the time inside and outside. This is something, because you asked this, this is something which in some moments comes to us as this inside, as this flash of experience.

I think that, I'm sure that everybody listening to us right now can remember moments of these epiphanies when suddenly the world revealed itself as being an inside and being full of meaning or full of light or full of lightness. To my eyes these moments are like the tips of the iceberg and they're no illusions and they are not even special moments but they're doors which can lead us into training ourselves to always experience the world as being a physical outside which is an expression of some inwardness.

What happens to me through my work in a way I'm constantly living in this middle zone between these both worlds in a way because I'm always trying to be open to this interpenetration of both. That's my way of, that's maybe my bio-poetic way of meditation. Like, great spiritual teachers are always able to immediately access that level of mindfulness which comes with meditation.

KOSMOS | I think it's the true way of the Seeker the Spiritual Warrior. I think even the mystic or the saint makes this distinction between the divine and the literal world and that what you're describing is really the superimposition of the two that as we become more adept at recognizing.

When you say mystic in a way it is a mystic experience, and in a way the book it's a protocol of a mystic voyage or mystic quest in a way. One part of this protocol is informed by biological thinking and other part of this protocol is informed by the attempt to really get into our nonverbal connection with other living beings, but it is mystical in the sense that the mystic sees our experiences inside through outside and our experience is the union of both. That's very much my conviction that we do this actually as living beings or we are this as living beings and mystics of all ages somehow got a glimpse of this.

That's the first thing that the newborn human or any other newborn being experiences it's the feeling of I, self, here, this world is relevant to me. I'm kind of trying to find this again, and this just meets with the age old mystic search and mystic experiences and to my eyes it's the same thing.

KOSMOS | It's the same.

Very simple and it's very big at the same time.

KOSMOS | Exactly. The title of the series is *Preparing for Profound Change*, and I feel like everything you're saying is relevant to that topic and yet I do want to ask you, how can we look at what's happening around us with clear eyes when we talk about maybe in terms of environmental collapse for example and still find purpose and inspiration? How can we prepare for the profound changes that are coming?

Well, the profound changes that are coming are the profound changes that are happening in every process of identity, which is every life form all the time. In a very difficult and astonishing way, well let's say the profound changes or even this sadness of goodbye or this sadness of loss which is englobing us is just a variant of the sadness of loss which happens if you are fully alive. It happens already in what I tried to explain as our metabolism that you cannot own your body, which is fascinating. You cannot own your body because your body is made of the world and this world escapes you, and you need to reconstruct yourself from this world again.

That's a constant question actually. How to make sense of this deep loss and mourning we are experiencing at the moment and which probably and surely will become much more intense in the time to come and for a long time. I don't think it will be a short moment, it will be a very long phase, but it can teach us to understand that to be alive means to let go on a very ecological level. It means it's not about me. It's not about securing myself.

We have these two sides. We have the side of deep loss which then also means a deep opening to newness and it's very enigmatic because on an individual level it's a profound pain, but maybe on a global holistic level it's also the start of something new and it's very difficult to understand this and to reconcile this in a usual existence. I only know that there's a very, very deep and meaningful teaching to be heard if we truly open ourselves up to what is happening right now.

KOSMOS | It's another one of those of poetic contradictions I guess. I sometimes think that happiness is overrated. You know what I mean?

Yeah.

KOSMOS | Look, it's hard to be happy and aware of the world suffering at the same time, and yet your book teaches me life is this gift. It reminds me that it's here to be enjoyed in every moment and that's part of the answer.

Thanks for that. I would say happiness is overrated and to be real is underrated. It's interesting that if you grant yourself, if you allow yourself to be real and to be just that what you are. Then something happens to you which might even be accompanied by happiness. Being real which means letting go comes first, and that's what we kind of don't know how to do in our societies. We're always striving for happiness.

I mean, the pursuit to happiness that's the archetype of American paradigm. It's happiness but you don't get there in looking for happiness and sacrificing your reality or the way you truly are or the way you really desire to connect or the way the biosphere renews itself through dying. That's all reality and you can't just overlay it with happiness. It doesn't work this way around, so maybe that's part of the teaching where we can have if we open our eyes. It's about how to be real.

KOSMOS | Would you read that passage from near the end of the book.

Actually, yeah, yeah, I'd love to. I'd love to.

KOSMOS | We've had two passages so far about birds and this is another one about birds and I think it really gets to what we're talking about right now.

This is something, this happens only in situations like this. I recently I've written a book about birds. I wasn't there first. I never thought about it like this. This is happening at a small lake in the forest not far from my place here at Berlin, which has a beautiful forest in its center and more or less in its center. It's about one summer evening and at lake. The lake was completely filled with itself and on its surface the lilies drifted just like me as I was swimming in it.

“I remember that once, as I was swimming back, near to the shore, in the spot where I could stand again, I encountered another swimmer, a kind-looking Japanese woman who was wearing an oversized pair of goggles for some reason. She was standing in the water with her squarish, overlarge mask and staring agog at four young ducks paddling toward from a carpet of water lilies. And then her whole face broke out in laughter; she stood there alone and could not stop laughing. And with my wet skin and limbs surrounded by cool water, I understood that laughter is an organ of happiness. Not of “humor.” With our laughter, we greet happiness, just as this Japanese woman greeted the ducks and the You in their black button eyes, just as I greeted the water and the You in this water. All that mattered was laughter, was laughing in happiness.”

KOSMOS | Just wonderful. I want to remind our listeners that the book is *Matter and Desire: An Erotic Ecology* by our guest Andreas Weber. Thank you Andreas. I can't tell you just how much I've enjoyed this past hour with you and your work is just inspiring. Thank you for joining us on Kosmos Live.

Thanks so much Rhonda for hosting me, for having me here. Thanks so much.