

# The Entangled Human: Fourfold Vision, Sacred Unity and the Ethics of Transmaterial Living

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**Abstract**

This paper introduces the *Entangled Human* as a way of perceiving and practising that recognises our inseparability from the living systems around us. Drawing on Gregory Bateson's ecology of mind, William Blake's *Fourfold Vision*, and Karen Barad's idea of onto-epistemology, it proposes an ethical stance grounded in awareness of entanglement rather than connection alone.

Through a blend of lived reflection, ecological observation and theoretical dialogue, the paper situates systemic practice within what Simon and Salter (2019) describe as transmaterial worlding. Presence is reframed as practice, and Sacred Unity as an embodied discipline of attention that honours the patterns linking all forms of life.

Blake's Fourfold Vision is interpreted as an ecology of perception. Single Vision represents the mechanistic logic of separation. Twofold Vision opens relational awareness. Threefold Vision brings imagination and emotion into knowing. Fourfold Vision points toward a lived experience of unity within diversity. Rather than stages of progress, these ways of seeing coexist, offering a fluid and ethical sensibility for practice.

For systemic practitioners, this orientation involves inhabiting relationship rather than observing from outside it. To live systemically is to live immanently, recognising that every act of meaning-making has material and ecological consequence. Ethical practice then becomes participation in an ongoing field of mutual becoming.

The *Entangled Human* invites a stance of humility, imagination and care. It calls for therapists and others to cultivate a Fourfold sensibility that holds paradox, acknowledges kinship across species, and acts with reverence for life. In doing so, it gestures toward a transmaterial ethics for living that may help us respond with integrity to the crises of our time.

Thinking. Mulling. Composting.

What do I want to say?

I've just been out into the garden, checking the greenhouse and the nettle seeds drying there. Eventually, they will be baked into flapjacks. Last summer I discovered that nettle seeds were very beneficial to my health and decided to harvest more this year. On this early summer morning, I have already been outside in my garden, watching a male pheasant, a regular and comparatively tame visitor, stretching from a fence to reach one of the bird feeders. His partner, whom we named Greta, is bolder. She often approaches us for sunflower seeds, making the most delightful clucking sounds as she comes closer.

Recently fledged magpies have been up to their usual fuckery, gack-gack-gacking with what I can only think of as glee as they torment the pheasants and amuse themselves by chucking pebbles from a small dish of water my partner had left out for the bees. Magpies are mischievous creatures. They poke about, scatter things, and trouble animals larger than themselves, pecking the tails of foxes, for example. Their ways of enquiry feel both daring and curious.

My garden is, in some ways, a testament to my own magpie logic. Visitors might consider parts of it a mess. There are pots, plants, bags of sand and compost, and an old metal folding table inherited from my parents. On it sits the evidence of an unsuccessful attempt to make a concrete bird bath, a reminder that I failed to add enough sand to the mix. At the top of the garden is a wide strip of wild growth. Nettles, ox-eye daisies, teasels, mallow, and others grow there freely. It looks untidy. It is also a haven for life. Self-heal (*Prunella vulgaris*) is growing in abundance, and I am looking forward to making tinctures in a few weeks. As I gaze over these plants, thriving in the current heatwave, I find myself wondering what they might say to the closely mown grass nearby.

My thoughts drift to family. Concerns about my daughter's health, my grandchildren at school, and my son's workload. Now, on my computer, I think about my own work at the university, marking and preparing for the coming academic year. Distracted, I glance at the news. This morning it is much the same. Violence. Money. Record temperatures.

I am not just connected to all of this. I am entangled in it. Gregory Bateson famously asked, "What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the primrose to the orchid, and all of them to me, and me to you?" (Bateson, 1979, p. 8; see also Bateson, 1977; Bateson & Bateson, 1987; Bateson, 1991; Bateson, 2011). These patterns and connections feel, to me, like entanglements. They lead me to wonder what kind of logic a magpie follows, or a nettle, or a glacier that is melting. And who is listening?

The idea, perhaps even the figure, of the entangled human arose from a growing awareness that none of us is an isolated individual. Initially, I thought of this as the connected human, but entangled feels more accurate. We are integral elements of life, intimately intertwined with the personal, professional, and global ecosystems that both shape us and are shaped by us. This awareness emerged through my earlier writing and doctoral work, where I linked Bateson's epistemology with William Blake's Fourfold Vision. That work led me to understand Bateson's notion of sacred unity (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, Bateson, 1991) as an expression of living from a fully second-order position in an immanent universe where everything, everyone, is kin.

Immanence, as I am using it here, describes the understanding that there is no external source of

meaning, agency, or causation acting upon life from outside. In Baruch Spinoza's formulation of *Deus sive Natura* (Spinoza, 1677/1996), God is not a transcendent force but the immanent cause of all that exists, with every being understood as a mode or expression of a single, unfolding substance. Gregory Bateson translated this philosophical stance into an ecological and systemic register, arguing that mind is immanent in the relational pathways of the organism-plus-environment, rather than located within individual bodies. This understanding of immanence has also been taken up and elaborated in contemporary philosophy, most notably by Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze, 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), who describes immanence as the plane upon which life continually differentiates and becomes. While I do not draw directly on Deleuze's conceptual apparatus here, his work reinforces the central claim being made: that there is no detached vantage point outside life from which knowledge or ethics can be secured. Immanence, in this sense, is not a metaphysical abstraction but an ethical orientation, grounding second-order practice in the recognition that responsibility arises from participation rather than distance. I have developed this understanding of immanence more fully elsewhere, describing it as an ethical and relational orientation that locates the sacred within the ordinary, lived patterns of systemic and ecological life (Palmer, 2025).

Returning to the word *kin*, it is usually understood as family or relatives. In a broader sense, all living beings trace back to common ancestors. The word kindness also stems from kin, suggesting that a predisposition toward kindness to other beings may be intrinsic to sacred unity.

Like many systemic practitioners, I once understood a first-order position as one of separation between therapist and client, and a second-order position as the recognition that therapist and client together form a system. My own experience of learning about second-order practice was that it was often framed as a strategy, a way of thinking in the room about how to work with clients. The therapeutic context was understood as a bounded unit, comprising clients and therapist, beginning and ending with each session.

Now, rather than treating second-order positioning as a strategy, I try to remain continually aware of my entanglement with everything and everyone else. You, reading this, are my kin. My clients are kin. So too are the nettles and the magpies. As I sit here writing about systemic practice, I cannot help but think about Jeff Bezos's recent extravagant wedding, the heatwaves, and the glaciers dying. I cannot pretend the garden is separate from Gaza, or the magpies from billionaires.

For me, there is no longer an outside. There is only entanglement, and the question of whether, and how, we might act with integrity within it. This paper is an attempt to stay with that entanglement, to write from within it rather than about it, and to see what happens when my thinking and practice are allowed to be composted by it. I think, and hope, this is what Simon and Salter (2019) describe as "transmaterial worlding": the recognition that every act of meaning-making is already entangled with the material and political conditions of life.

Bateson was acutely aware that epistemologies are not abstract. They are the premises by which we adapt, or fail to adapt, to the world. He wrote, "The living man is thus bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which... become partially self-validating" (Bateson, 1972, p. 320). Perception, in this sense, is never purely conscious or freely chosen. It arises through recursive loops of culture, biology, and relationship. Entanglement.

Barad offers a related critique through her notion of onto-epistemology, the idea that there is no separation between what exists and how it is known (Barad, 2007). Knowing is both material and relational. Matter and meaning emerge together. Where Bateson emphasised recursive description, Barad focuses on intra-action as the process through which entities and realities come into being. Both share an understanding that knowledge is never innocent. It is always participatory, and therefore carries responsibility.

In my own practice, this realisation has gradually shifted my understanding of systemic therapy. Rather than seeing it primarily as a method of intervention (Keeney, 1983; Keeney & Keeney, 2012), I have come to experience it as a discipline of presence, a way of inhabiting entanglement consciously. What I attend to, how I speak, and what I assume are all acts of worlding. There is no longer an outside position.

### **From Fourfold Vision to Sacred Unity and the Entangled Human**

Before introducing Blake's (1926) poem, it may help to offer a brief orientation. When I speak of Fourfold Vision, I am not describing a model that can be applied or a sequence that can be mastered. I am pointing to different ways of attending that move through us, sometimes within the same conversation or moment. These ways of seeing are not stages to be climbed but sensibilities that rise and fall, shaping how we notice, respond, and participate.

Only with that in mind does Blake's poem begin to speak more clearly:

Now I a fourfold vision see,  
 And a fourfold vision is given to me;  
 'Tis fourfold in my supreme delight,  
 And threefold in soft Beulah's night,  
 And twofold always. May God us keep  
 From Single vision & Newton's sleep.

(William Blake, Letter to Thomas Butt, 22 November 1802)

When I first began thinking about Fourfold Vision, I imagined it as a kind of developmental ladder, moving from narrow reductionism toward a broader and more humane gaze. That framing was useful for a time, but now I understand it less as a hierarchy and more as a shifting field of sensibilities that move in and out of prominence, often simultaneously.

Single Vision is what Blake described in the letter to Butts as "Newton's sleep". It isolates parts and mechanisms. It is the mode that allows us to plan, measure, categorise, and intervene. Used well, it has undeniable value, but in isolation, Single Vision strips the world of resonance and reduces living systems to manageable fragments. It is a deeply dualistic way of seeing, cutting reality into pieces that appear separate and inert.

Twofold Vision introduces relational awareness. It brings an ability to notice pattern, connection, feedback, and mutual influence. Bateson (1979) described this as double description, the generative effect of holding more than one account of reality at once. Yet even here, I notice that I am often

positioned as an observer. I map systems, trace loops, and think about relationships from a slight distance. The system is still something I am looking at.

Threefold Vision invites subjectivity into the picture. Imagination, memory, affect, and bodily knowing begin to shape perception. This is the domain of the imaginal and the unconscious, where experience is saturated with meaning rather than explained by it (Corbin, 1972; Duncan, 2021). Here, my own presence is no longer incidental. What I notice is inseparable from who I am and what I carry. Knowing becomes participatory, felt, and personal.

For me, Fourfold Vision is not a destination but a glimpse. It is a resonance, a fleeting but powerful sense that everything is already alive, already communicating, already entangled. Blake called this Eden. Bateson (1987) spoke of sacred unity. Barad (2007) might describe it as an onto-epistemological condition. I experience it as a discipline of presence, a practice of returning again and again to the awareness that there is no detached vantage point.

Where Twofold Vision still inclines toward thinking about second-order positions, Fourfold Vision is an inhabiting of them. It is a surrender to the fact that I am always already part of what I am trying to understand. I am not observing the world from the outside. I am being worlded by it. There is no outside at all, only this ongoing, mutual becoming.

### **Entanglements: Fourfold Vision, Sacred Unity, Second Order, and Immanence**

Fourfold Vision could easily be read as a developmental ladder, but that reading would be misleading, as it would reintroduce the very dualism this approach is trying to counter. I have come to experience Fourfold Vision instead as an ever-shifting field of tension. Single Vision, the domain of detail, precision, and control, is not simply an error to be overcome, but a necessary pole. Its friction with other ways of seeing generates awareness rather than blocking it.

Gregory Bateson recognised this movement in the oscillation between lineal and systemic description (Bateson, 1972). Karen Barad names it through the dynamic cuts by which meaning and matter come into being (Barad, 2007). Iain McGilchrist describes it neurologically, with the left hemisphere grasping, naming, and fixing, while the right hemisphere holds context, relationship, and ambiguity (McGilchrist, 2019). Each mode is partial. Together they form a richer, and more precarious, whole.

I also find myself wondering whether neurodivergence sits within this terrain. Some people attend to detail with extraordinary fidelity, an intensified form of Single Vision. Others experience relationality or sensory immersion that resists linear categorisation. Rather than treating these differences as deficits to be corrected, they might be understood as reminders that there is no singular way to inhabit perception, although these differences can be experienced as pain or marginalisation, not only richness. Blake's insistence that "without contraries is no progression" speaks here (Blake, 1975 p. 15). The work is not to erase difference, but to remain present to its tensions. To live systemically is to notice the dance of contraries in ourselves and in the world, while resisting the pull to collapse everything into the safety of one dominant mode.

Within Fourfold Vision, sacred unity, second-order thinking, and immanence are not separate ideas. They are interwoven aspects of a coherent relational orientation. Fourfold Vision functions both as a shifting lens and as a discipline of attention that enables movement between individual, relational, reflective, and systemic perspectives without treating these as discrete steps. What is important is

less about mastery of each mode, but the capacity to remain responsive to what a situation is calling forth.

Bateson's notion of sacred unity has come to represent, for me, the ethical and experiential heart of this orientation. It names the recognition that life is fundamentally interconnected, and that distinctions between self and other, human and more-than-human, are provisional rather than absolute. Sacred unity is not an abstract ideal. It is a way of being that repeatedly situates us within relationship. For practitioners, it reframes therapy as participation in an ecosystem rather than intervention upon it.

Second-order thinking underpins this stance. Where first-order approaches position the therapist as an external observer, second-order thinking recognises the therapist as part of the system being described. Boundaries between observer and observed become permeable, and certainty gives way to attentiveness. Drawing on the work of Imelda McCarthy and Jean Minogue, this perspective treats ambiguity not as a problem to be solved but as a condition of ethical engagement (McCarthy & Minogue, 2019). Meaning emerges through participation rather than control.

Immanence situates all of this firmly in the present. Rather than seeking meaning in transcendence or elsewhere, immanence affirms that the sacred and the systemic are already present within each moment and interaction. Influenced by deep ecological thinking, particularly that of Arne Næss, immanence draws attention back to the living world as it is (Næss, 1973, 2008). It asks us not to rise above complexity, but to stay with it, recognising that responsibility arises from proximity rather than distance.

Taken together, Fourfold Vision, sacred unity, second-order thinking, and immanence form an ethical orientation rather than a technique. They invite a way of seeing and practising that respects the complexity, vulnerability, and interconnectedness of life. For systemic therapists, this is not only a framework for clinical work, but a way of inhabiting the world with greater care, reflexivity, and accountability.

### **Fourfold Vision as a Practice: A Journey with No End**

Fourfold Vision is, at its heart, a way of apprehending what Gregory Bateson called sacred unity, and of recognising ourselves as entangled within it. It invites us to see beyond the divisions that fragment our understanding, and to sense the relational fabric that holds life together. This is not simply a conceptual framework; it is a practice, a discipline, and an ongoing journey. For systemic therapists, this practice begins with recognising the interconnectedness that already sits at the heart of our work. Therapist, client, and context are never separate. They are already part of a larger relational field. Yet Fourfold Vision is not primarily an intellectual stance. It is an embodied awareness, one that exceeds theory and touches something relational and, for me, sacred.

The first movement into this way of practising is a shift in presence. Each therapeutic encounter becomes an invitation to show up as a responsive participant rather than a detached professional. Presence here is not about calmness or attunement alone. It is a willingness to notice what we bring with us into the room, and how that presence participates in shaping what becomes possible. A simple reflective pause can sometimes be enough: What am I bringing into this moment? How am I already part of what is unfolding here?

Such questions help anchor the therapist within the wider relational field, allowing sacred unity to be experienced rather than merely referenced. Each session becomes a threshold into a living web of relationship, where words, silences, gestures, and histories interact. I had earlier written about systemic activism (Palmer, 2021), but within this awareness, and following a conversation with Satish Kumar, something closer to what might be described as sacred activism (Kumar, 2023) begins to take shape. By this, I mean action guided less by control or outcome and more by care, restraint, and ethical participation within a shared relational process.

Practising Fourfold Vision also requires a growing tolerance for ambiguity. This is a journey that involves learning how to remain with questions rather than being oriented toward resolution or an outcome. Although we are accustomed to complexity, systemic therapists, can still feel the pull toward closure, formulation, or solution. Fourfold Vision resists that pull and asks for a different discipline; staying with what is not yet clear, allowing meaning to emerge slowly, and accepting that some aspects of experience will remain beyond articulation. In this space, ambiguity becomes something to inhabit rather than overcome.

This stance is particularly tested in constrained settings such as social services, CAMHS, or forensic environments, where time pressures, risk protocols, and hierarchical structures can make presence difficult to sustain. In such contexts, practising Fourfold Vision may look deceptively modest. It may involve slowing the pace of a conversation, choosing language that resists objectification, or holding open a space for reflection when the system presses for certainty. Presence here is not a withdrawal from responsibility, but a careful, ethical positioning within constraint and clinical responsibility.

From within Fourfold Vision, ethical awareness extends beyond the immediate therapeutic interaction. Therapy becomes not only a space for individual or family work, but a site of relational responsibility within a broader ecology. Questions such as “How does my presence contribute to the health of this system?” or “What small act might restore a sense of balance or care here?” are not techniques. They are orienting questions that shape how one inhabits practice over time.

This ethical stance does not end at the therapy room door. It informs how therapists relate to colleagues, institutions, and the wider social and ecological contexts in which their work is embedded. Each moment of ethical presence becomes a way of participating in the relational web with humility and attentiveness, allowing therapeutic work to resonate beyond its immediate setting.

For me, Fourfold Vision has become a path of learning rather than mastery. It is an acknowledgement that there is always more to notice, more to understand, and more to be shaped by. Engaging with sacred unity in this way involves accepting a lifelong position as a learner, open to being changed by each encounter. Learning here is less about acquiring skills and more about cultivating humility and responsiveness within the relational fields we inhabit.

In this sense, Fourfold Vision becomes a way of life rather than a method. It shapes how moments are met, how decisions are made, and how care is extended. There is no final arrival. The practice unfolds through relationship, day by day.

Fourfold Vision is therefore both deeply personal and profoundly communal. It is the understated, committed work of a therapist who understands their practice not as an isolated activity, but as participation in a shared and fragile commitment to life itself.

## Living Systemically, Living Immanently

My challenge to you, the reader, is the same challenge I make for myself; to move beyond theory and to embody a way of being that reflects Fourfold Vision. What began for me as an intellectual exercise has become a lived commitment, one that acknowledges my entanglement with other people, with more-than-human life, and with the systems that shape us all. For therapists, this means expanding our attention beyond individual concerns to the wider relational fields in which clients live. Families, communities, institutions, ecosystems, and society at large. In personal life, it calls for a continuing examination of our relationships with power, nature, and spirituality, and for an effort to live in ways that respect the unity of life (Foucault, 1975, 1976; Goldner, 1985). This orientation also resonates with posthuman feminist work that situates ethics, knowledge, and responsibility within materially entangled processes of becoming, rather than human-centred mastery (Braidotti, 2019; Braidotti & Bignall, 2019).

Fourfold Vision can be understood, then, as a call to wholeness. It invites a way of seeing and being that recognises sacred unity not as an abstract principle, but as something lived. When second-order cybernetics is held alongside immanence, the familiar separations between observer and observed, system and environment, human and non-human begin to loosen. This perspective resonates with Bateson's insistence that life is composed of interwoven systems, nested within one another, each participating in a larger, relational whole. Seen this way, Fourfold Vision becomes a living ecosophy rather than a framework (Næss, 1973, 2008).

Reflecting on the limits of dualistic thinking, Bateson once wrote that he had driven himself into a place where conventional mind–body distinctions, along with the inherited dualisms of Darwinism, psychoanalysis, and theology, had become unintelligible (Bateson, 1977, p. 236; see also Bateson & Bateson, 1987). This disorientation was not a failure of thought, but a necessary consequence of taking relationality seriously. Fourfold Vision grows from a similar refusal of easy divisions, and from a willingness to let established categories fall away when they no longer serve life.

In a time marked by ecological, social, and existential crises, Fourfold Vision does not offer any solutions, rather, it offers an ethical orientation. By honouring the inherent value of all forms of life, and by attending carefully to the entanglements that sustain us, it points toward ways of living that resist domination and control. What emerges instead is a humbler attentiveness to complexity, vulnerability, and mutual dependence, and an invitation to live with greater care for the conditions that make life possible.

In the end, Fourfold Vision is an invitation to think, be, and act differently. Drawing together Blake's insistence on multiple ways of seeing, Bateson's cybernetic epistemology, deep ecological thought, and agential realism, it suggests that entities do not exist independently, but come into being through their relations. To take this seriously is to accept that how we attend, how we speak, and how we act all matter. Sacred unity, in this sense, is not a destination to be reached, but an ongoing practice, personal, professional, and planetary, shaped one moment at a time.

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