

The Inventory Life & Arts

Merlin Sheldrake: 'I care about the ways humans conduct themselves in their relationships with the living world'

Q&A with the biologist and writer on his grandfather's pharmacy, the mystery of the afterlife and owning an apple orchard



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Hester Lacey JANUARY 22 2022

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Merlin Sheldrake, 34, received a PhD in tropical ecology from Cambridge university for his work on underground fungal networks in forests in Panama. *Entangled Life*, his first book, won the 2021 Royal Society Science Book Prize.

What was your childhood or earliest ambition?

It changed by the hour. I might have liked the idea of being an engineer, then by the end of the day have decided that I'd rather be a diver or a musician.

Private school or state school? University or straight into work?

State school, then private school, then university.

Who was or still is your mentor?

I feel blessed to have had many. One of them was the historical ecologist Oliver Rackham, who taught me as an undergraduate. Oliver was a wonderful teacher and an accomplished sleuth. His field trips were a roving one-man show, his stagecraft antique and understated. He took us to woodland and told us about the history of these places and their human inhabitants by reading the twists and splits in the branches of old oak trees, by observing where nettles thrived, by noting which plants did or didn't grow in a hedgerow. Under Oliver's influence, the clean line I had imagined dividing "nature" and "culture" started to blur.

How physically fit are you?

Movement and physical activity are important parts of my life. I find skipping, swimming in cold water and *neigong* particularly nourishing.

Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?

Ambition can generate talent; talent can also generate ambition. I can't think of an instance where someone wouldn't depend on some dance between the two. What kind of dance this is will depend on how one defines success.

How politically committed are you?

I care about the way humans treat others, whether human or non-human, and I care about the ways humans conduct themselves in their relationships with the living world. This leaves me feeling frustrated and motivated in more or less equal measure.

What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?

An orchard. I'd assemble a living library of rare and peculiar apple varieties to ferment into rare and peculiar ciders.

What's your biggest extravagance?

Good food.

In what place are you happiest?

Walking, playing the piano with no one around or in a kitchen making fermented hot sauce.

What ambitions do you still have?

I enjoy not knowing. Maybe it's a little like sailing: I need to make sure my boat is in good shape, with a working rudder, spare sails, a map and compass. But exactly where I'm going is hard to say because it depends on the weather. Unexpected winds can encourage a generative change of course.

What drives you on?

There are many ways to play, to explore, to understand, to create and to feel. And many opportunities to halt our ecocidal activities.

What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?

To reach my age feeling healthy and fulfilled. Although much of the credit must go to all those who have loved and cared for me, not to mention the non-human creatures whose lives make my life possible.

What do you find most irritating in other people?

Dogmatic certainty. Especially if the dogmatist goes out of their way to foist their certainty on others.

If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?

He'd be amused and not entirely surprised to find that I'm a biologist and a writer engaging with subjects that have long fascinated me.

Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?

My grandfather had a pharmacy filled with beautiful specimen drawers and medicine bottles which were given away after his death.

What is the greatest challenge of our time?

Can we find a way to compost greed in its various forms? The unrelenting corporate greed that drives so much psychological, humanitarian and ecological damage, climate change and numberless other tangled crises.

Do you believe in an afterlife?

The matter and microbes that compose our bodies will continue to journey through their earthly cycles after we die, a thought I find comforting. As for our souls — I don't know. I enjoy the mystery.

If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?

Seven. I'm happy and grateful for all that I have. But we've created such trouble, and so much transformation is needed.

"Entangled Life: How Fungi Make Our Worlds, Change Our Minds and Shape Our Futures" by Merlin Sheldrake is published by The Bodley Head

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