

# [PDF] Life Everlasting: The Animal Way Of Death

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**Books Details:**

Title: Life Everlasting: The Animal  
Author: Bernd Heinrich  
Released: 2013-06-04  
Language:  
Pages: 256  
ISBN: 0544002261  
ISBN13: 978-0544002265  
ASIN: 0544002261

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**Description:**

**About the Author** Bernd Heinrich is an acclaimed scientist and author of numerous books, including the best-selling *Winter World*, *Mind of the Raven*, and *Why We Run*. He writes for *Scientific American*, *Outside*, *American Scientist*, and *Audubon*, and has published book reviews and op-eds for the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. Among Heinrich's many honors is the 2013 PEN New England Award for Nonfiction, for *Life Everlasting*.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

If you would know the secret of death you must seek it in the heart of life. — Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*

. . . Earth's the right place for love; I don't know where it's likely to go better. — Robert Frost, "Birches"

*Yo, Bernd —*

*I've been diagnosed with a severe illness and am trying to get my final disposition arranged in case I drop sooner than I hoped. I want a green burial — not any burial at all — because human burial is today an alien approach to death.*

*Like any good ecologist, I regard death as changing into other kinds of life. Death is, among other things, also a wild celebration of renewal, with our substance hosting the party. In the wild, animals lie where they die, thus placing them into the scavenger loop. The upshot is that the highly concentrated animal nutrients get spread over the land, by the exodus of flies, beetles, etc. Burial, on the other hand, seals you in a hole. To deprive the natural world of human nutrient, given a population of 6.5 billion, is to starve the Earth, which is the consequence of casket burial, an internment. Cremation is not an option, given the buildup of greenhouse gases, and considering the amount of fuel it takes for the three-hour process of burning a body. Anyhow, the upshot is, one of the options is burial on private property. You can probably guess what's coming . . . What are your thoughts on having an old friend as a permanent resident at the camp? I feel great at the moment, never better in my life in fact. But it's always later than you think.*

This letter from a friend and colleague compelled me toward a subject I have long found fascinating: the web of life and death and our relationship to it. At the same time, the letter made me think about our human role in the scheme of nature on both the global and the local level. The "camp" referred to is on forest land I own in the mountains of western Maine. My friend had visited me there some years earlier to write an article on my research, which was then mostly with insects, especially bumblebees but also caterpillars, moths, butterflies, and in the last three decades, ravens. I think it was my studies of ravens, sometimes referred to as the "northern vultures," that may have motivated him to write me. The ravens around my camp scavenged and recycled hundreds of animal carcasses that friends, colleagues, and I provided for them there.

My friend knows we share a vision of our mortal remains continuing "on the wing." We like to imagine our afterlives riding through the skies on the wings of birds such as ravens and vultures, who are some of the more charismatic of nature's undertakers. The dead animals they disassemble and spread around are then reconstituted into all sorts of other amazing life throughout the ecosystem. This physical reality of nature is for both of us not only a romantic ideal but also a real link to place that has personal meaning. Ecologically speaking, this vision also involves plants, which makes our human role global as well.

The science of ecology/biology links us to the web of life. We are a literal part of the creation, not some afterthought — a revelation no less powerful than the Ten Commandments thrust upon Moses. According to strict biblical interpretations, we are "dust [that shall] return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7); "thou return unto the ground; for out of it thou wast taken; for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." (Genesis 3:19).

The ancient Hebrews were not ecologists, however. If the famous lines from Genesis and Ecclesiastes had been stated with scientific precision, they would not have been understood for two thousand years; not one reader would have been ready for the concept. "Dust" was a metaphor for matter, earth, or soil. But in our minds the word "dust" suggests mere dirt. We came from and return to just dirt. No wonder early Christians belittled our physical existence and sought separation

from it.

But in fact we do not come from dust, nor do we return to dust. We come from life, and we are the conduit into other life. We come from and return to incomparably amazing plants and animals. Even while we are alive, our wastes are recycled directly into beetles, grass, and trees, which are recycled further into bees and butterflies and on to flycatchers, finches, and hawks, and back into grass and on into deer, cows, goats, and us.

I do not claim originality in examining the key role of the specialized undertakers that ease all organisms to their resurrection into others' lives. I do believe, however, that many readers are willing to examine taboos and to bring this topic into the open as something relevant to our own species. Our role as hominids evolving from largely herbivorous animals to hunting and scavenging carnivores is especially relevant to this topic; our imprint has changed the world.

The truism that life comes from other life and that individual death is a necessity for continuing life hides or detracts from the ways in which these transformations happen. The devil, as they say, is in the details.

Recycling is perhaps most visible — as well as dramatic and spectacular — in large animals, but far more of it occurs in plants, where the most biomass is concentrated. Plants get their nutrients from the soil and the air in the form of chemicals — all bodies are built of carbons linked together, later to be disassembled and released as carbon dioxide — but nevertheless they are still “living off” other life. The carbon dioxide that plants take up to build their bodies is made available through the agency of bacteria and fungi and is sucked up massively and imperceptibly from the enormous pool of past and present life. The carbon building blocks that make a daisy or a tree come from millions of sources: a decaying elephant in Africa a week ago, an extinct cycad of the Carboniferous age, an Arctic poppy returning to the earth a month ago. Even if those molecules were released into the air the previous day, they came from plants and animals that lived millions of years ago. All of life is linked through a physical exchange on the cellular level. The net effect of this exchange created the atmosphere as we know it and also affects our climate now.

Carbon dioxide, as well as oxygen, nitrogen, and the other molecular building blocks of life, are exchanged freely from one to all and all to one daily on a global scale, wafted and stirred throughout the atmosphere by the trade winds, by hurricanes and breezes. Molecules that have long been sequestered in soil may be exchanged within the local community over a long time. Plants are made from building blocks derived from centipedes, gorgeous moths and butterflies, birds and mice, and many other mammals, including humans. The “ingestion” of carbon by plants is really a kind of microscopic scavenging that happens after intermediaries have disassembled other organisms into their molecular parts. The process differs in method from that of a raven eating a deer or a salmon, whose meat is then spread through the forest in large and not yet fully disassembled packets of nitrogen, but it does not differ in concept.

DNA, on the other hand, though made mainly of carbon and nitrogen, is precisely organized and passed on directly from one individual plant or animal to the next through a fabulous copying mechanism that has operated since the dawn of life. Organisms inherit specific DNA molecules, which are copied and passed from one individual to another, and so it has continued over billions of years of ever-conservative descent, which has branched through innovation into trees, birds-of-paradise, elephants, mice, and men.

We think of the animals that do the important work of redistributing the stuff of life as scavengers, and we may admire and appreciate them for providing their necessary “service” as nature's undertakers. We think of them as life-giving links that keep nature's systems humming along smoothly. We tend to distinguish scavengers from predators, who provide the same service, but by killing, which we associate with destruction. But as I began to think about nature's undertakers, the distinction between predators and scavengers became blurred and almost arbitrary in my mind. A “pure” scavenger lives only on dead organisms, and a pure predator only on what it kills. But very few animals are strictly one or the other. Ravens and magpies may be pure scavengers in the winter,

but in the fall they are herbivores eating berries, and in the summer they are predators living on insects and mice and anything else they can kill. Certain specialists, however, some with unique abilities, spend most of their time finding food in one way. Polar bears usually catch seals at their breathing holes in the ice, but on occasion they will find and eat a dead one. A grizzly bear will relish a dead caribou as well as one it has killed, but most of the time it grazes on plants. A peregrine falcon is a swift flyer that captures flying prey, while a vulture would not as a rule be able to capture an uninjured live bird, so it has to rely on large, already dead prey. Indeed, vultures, ravens, lions, and almost all of the animals we typically typecast as “predators” just as readily take the ailing and half-dead and the (preferably fresh) dead; they will not enter a fight for life with another animal unless they have to. Herbivores too take those organisms that are least able to defend themselves. Deer and squirrels, for instance, munc...

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