Nature: Truth and Reconciliation

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**Introduction**

On Remembrance Day 2015 I was staying with my parents who lived through the Second World War. Together we watched the ceremony at the cenotaph in Whitehall, central London, which honours the heroes and the dead of the 1st and 2nd World Wars. As I watched the ceremony I fell into a reverie in search of a Remembrance Day that I would like to be part of. The following dream/vision unfolded:

I’m in Whitehall, it’s many decades into the future, and I’m part of a huge parade of peoples and creatures from all over the world. At the centre of the ceremony there is no more cenotaph, but instead a huge gnarled tree. Hundreds of plants and animals are carved into its trunk to remember the mass extinction of species, alongside the faces of many diverse peoples who worked tirelessly to care for the earth during the Age of Ecocide.

This Remembrance Day marks the time when the Truth and Reconciliation with Nature began, the time of making amends with the earth, a radical shift in worldview when humans began to see the rest of nature as subjects, rather than a bunch of objects apparently devoid of soul, to be used as ‘resources’ with no thought of reciprocity.

**“I have a dream”**

Many activists are inspired by a dream of making a better world and then campaign for political change. But as we know from history the inner work of social change (as in racism and sexism, for example) is complex and very lengthy. Those holding the power are challenged to take back their projections of unwanted parts of the self onto ‘the other’ and the oppressed must free themselves from these internalised projections. Anthropocentrism, the belief that humans are superior to all other beings on the planet, can be seen as a parallel situation to white superiority over black, to men over women, and calls for a similar revolution in understanding and psychological process.

In this chapter I will describe a series of inspiring projects which aim at social and ecological change, discussing their success and difficulties. I will be suggesting that there are two main cultural narratives alive at the present moment which appear to be going in opposite directions. The familiar narrative of mainstream culture, emerging out of a very long and complex history of western culture, tells a story about a heroic fight *against* nature, through domination and control, to make a better and safer world. Freedom is found by separating from ‘mother’ earth, transcending the messiness of being embodied, to find an apparently safe and reliable world of the intellectual mind. In Jungian terms this is favouring one function over the three others rooted in the body: feeling, sensation and intuition. This has brought us to a place of living by the rational function alone, as Jung describes:

“[T]he exaggerated rationalization of consciousness . . . seeking to control nature, isolates itself from her and so robs man of his own natural history. He finds himself transplanted into a limited present . . . . The limitation creates a feeling that he is a haphazard creature without meaning. . . . Hemmed round by rationalistic walls, we are cut off from the eternity of nature.” (Jung, 1960 Para 739)

The other more recently emerging narrative, in response to ecological crisis, is a story about humans being equal to all other lifeforms and bound into of the web of life, which is both matter and psyche, or, psychoid. Freedom is finding our way back into relationship with the larger whole, listening to ‘the other’, learning how the four functions work together, and learning interdependence - how to hold the tension between being ‘one with’ and being ‘separate from’.

Most people working for change are searching for various forms of the new story about humans as part of Nature; yet the first story is alive and well, and appears again and again as resistance to successful eco-projects.

I will start with the rainmaker story, a story which Jung loved to tell. It is a story relevant to climate change, and illustrates what Meredith Sabini calls ‘introverted activism’. (Sabini 2011 P94) It is a story about working with nature.

**The Rainmaker story**

“There was a great drought (in a village in Northern China). For months there had not been a drop of rain and the situation became catastrophic. …….. Finally the Chinese said: “We will fetch the rain maker”. And from another province, a dried up old man appeared. The only thing he asked for was a quiet little house somewhere, and there he locked himself in for three days. On the fourth day clouds gathered and there was a great snowstorm at the time of the year when no snow was expected…. and the town was so full of rumours about the wonderful rainmaker that Richard Wilhelm went to ask the man how he did it. In true European fashion he said, "They call you the rainmaker, will you tell me how you made the snow?" And the little Chinese man said, "I did not make the snow, I am not responsible." "But what have you done these three days?" “Oh, I can explain that. I come from another country where things are in order. Here they are out of order, they are not as they should be by the ordnance of heaven. Therefore, the whole country is not in Tao, and I am also not in the natural order of things because I am in a discorded country. So I had to wait three days until I was back in Tao, and then naturally the rain came.” (Jung 1963 pp419-420)

This story illustrates how change within one individual can have ripple effects on the world around, not only on other individuals, but on the whole ecosystem. Arguably humans have changed the climate as a result of becoming out of Tao; what would it take to reverse that change? What would this form of introverted activism look like in our modern lives? The following project is such an attempt.

**The Natural Change Project**

In 2004 I began to co-facilitate one week courses together with outdoor educator Dave Key, in Knoydart on the West coast of Scotland. Both of us were concerned about the seriousness of the ecological crisis but we did not believe that giving more alarmist information was the way to inspire people to take action. Rather, we wanted to create a space for deepening conversations about, and experiences of, our relationship with the land, with the other-than-human-world and with our own wild nature. Our experiences told us that spending time in wild nature (as close to wilderness as we could find in the UK) was a reliable and powerful way to come back into balance. As Jung writes:

“Walking in the woods, lying on the grass, taking a bathe in the sea, are from the outside; entering the unconscious entering yourself through dreams, is touching nature from the inside and this is the same thing. Things are put right again.” (Jung 1984 p142)

At the core of the week is a solo day: participants go off in silence at dawn to find a spot to stay in, until dusk. The task is to stay within a four metre radius and to simply ‘be’, to watch and to notice the connections between outside and inside. It is inviting people to have an experience of “finding their way back in” to the web of life, as a living psychic whole.

The next day is devoted to telling their stories which are always a mix of fear, excitement, boredom, as well as blissful experiences of oneness, timelessness and a longing to return to something original. This is a whole body experience. As all the senses become heightened the thinking mind begins to empty. There is more room for the functions of instinct, intuition and sensation to become balanced with intellect.

The experience of ‘I’ expands. Jung describes this in Memories, Dreams, Reflections:

“At times I feel like I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the splashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the procession of the seasons” (Jung, 1961 p225)

Rationalistic walls crumble, opening the door to an experience of eternity. The vast open spaces of wilderness, the majesty of the mountains, the power of the sea, the rain and the wind can humble the ‘I’. ‘I’ am now a tiny speck in the universe. Raw nature puts us in our place. For some this humility might trigger feelings of humiliation.

Sometimes inner and outer nature can mirror one another in the most uncanny way. A woman who was in a tender state of grief after recently losing her mother had found her way to her spot on the beach. After half an hour of relaxation she realised she was in the presence of a goat and kid who stayed with her all day. Synchronicity is abundant.

Other people describe nouminous experiences such as merging into rock, conversations with plants or animals, or hearing the heartbeat of the earth. It is these kind of experiences of living by a different law inexplicable to the western mind-set, which can dramatically shift a participant’s worldview. Often this is the first time that people have shared such experiences in a group and the witnessing can be profound.

What is most striking is the deep love that arises for the earth. Most are left fumbling for words in the presence of such awe and beauty, often overwhelmed by tears of relief at the sense of ‘coming home’. This can trigger a deep grief and mourning about what we, collectively, are doing to our larger body, the body of the earth; it is a reminder that the experience of becoming embodied can be painful. What can also emerge is a natural generosity to give back to the earth: to take action, not from a place of ‘should’ but from a place of love.

Great care is taken with re-integration. It might take some months, or even years, to allow the experiences to settle, to share them with others, to see how they might inform lifestyles and work.

It quickly became obvious that one week courses were just an introduction to this work. So in 2008 the Natural Change Project was set up by Dave Key and Scottish psychotherapist Margaret Kerr. It offered 6 month courses and was funded by a large green NGO. They selected community leaders from the health, education, private, youth, arts and NGO sectors in Scotland. When they were recruited to the project, none of these participants were active in the field of sustainability; one woman said at the start, “I thought nature was the gap between Harvey Nichols and the taxi door” (McDonald 2009).

The course consists of a series of residentials and weekends exploring the nature of change from different angles such as personal change, organisational change, lifestyle change. The solo days in the wilds of nature remained a central part of the course, but there was also a chance to experience a solo day in the city.

The director of the NGO said it had been their most successful project and campaign.

It inspired leaders in the community to understand sustainability at a deep level,

integrating feelings and practical action, bringing a deep connection with the rest of

nature back into mainstream culture via the ripples into all participant organisations.

(See Key & Kerr 2011, 2013)

**Resistance**

Yet despite such success, funding was discontinued. Why? I suspect that this project included too much emotional process for such a traditional green NGO, which would typically view the process of delving into the inner world as a distraction from effective practical action and at worst self-indulgent and manipulative. In Arnstein’s Ladder of Participation (Arnstein, S. 1969) ‘therapy’ is placed on the second to bottom rung of the ladder of citizen participation; at the bottom is ‘manipulation’! This chart is still used in teaching on participation in NGOs today. This split between action and reflection has its roots in the cultural narrative about fighting against nature; in this case it is about fighting our own nature, as if exploring feelings would lead us astray rather than liberating energy for action in the world.

On the other hand, the psychotherapy profession has been guilty at times of interpreting political action as a displacement from the ‘real’ inner concerns, at worst an ‘acting out’. In the middle lies a necessary movement between action and reflection.

Awareness of these two cultural narratives helps to bring insight into the resistance against new green initiatives. Here is another example of what I mean. Professor of Landscape Architecture Clare Cooper Marcus has spent decades trying to persuade architects to include gardens and green views in the design of hospitals. Research shows that spending time in gardens, parks or wild nature speeds up the healing process; even just a green view is healing (Cooper-Marcus & Barnes 1999). This would save hospitals huge amounts of time and money. Yet hospitals are moving in the other direction, towards germ free, high rise blocks with non-opening windows. Clearly this is a move away from nature; the outdoors is seen as dangerous rather than a healing environment. Ironically this old fashioned ‘germ-free’ method is now fostering superbugs! This is one of many examples of innovative eco-activism may be sabotaged by an outdated cultural narrative despite new methods which have ample proven research to back up their effectiveness.

**Super-quarry: A community Campaign**

My third example is about a successful campaign which helped a Scottish community to dialogue between two clashing worldviews: earth as utility and earth as sacred. In the early 1990’s a concrete manufacturing company called Lafarge proposed building a super-quarry in a mountain on the Isle of Harris, a National Scenic area of NW Scotland. Scottish activist and Human Ecologist Alastair McIntosh campaigned against this proposal for the biggest road-stone quarry in the world. He believed that right relationship with place is central to a sustainable livelihood. He writes:

“The cornerstone of the case to be argued was reverence. Thus I would suggest to the inquiry that to be reverent means to be concerned with the integrity of a thing or person; to value it for itself…..to work with it in celebration of its being….not with a graceless spirit of mere utility” (McIntosh 1996).

McIntosh invited two witnesses from very different backgrounds to support him in this case: Rev Macleod, a native Gaelic preacher and Stone Eagle, a native American warrior chief, who had been involved in campaigning against a super-quarry in his homeland of Nova Scotia. Both men argued that the land should be shown reverence because it is sacred. It would be an act of desecration to mine the mountain. This caught the imagination of the general public and soon there were newspaper articles and radio programmes about this campaign, which then became international news.

After a very long and protracted fight, the plans for the quarry were rejected. Part of that success was due to the voices of those who articulated to the community a different narrative, counteracting the idea that land is mere utility. The idea that land is sacred, that our relationship with it nourishes the soul, is a difficult case to argue. Frequently this voice is either absent altogether or drowned out by the argument that ‘development’ is economically beneficial to the community and therefore the necessary route.

In Jungian terms, how does archaic mind find the language to communicate itself to modern mind, who is so bound by reason and intellect?

**Reflections**

I have so far discussed the making conscious of two opposing narratives in understanding the process of change, and the resistance to change, in the work of eco-activism. But where is psychotherapy itself situated in relation to these narratives?

On the one hand, as I have pointed to earlier, psychotherapy is part of the newly emerging story because it is an exploration of emotional process; it therefore challenges the existing story about the dominance of the rational mind. On the other hand, psychotherapy has always been, and still remains, an exploration of *human* relationships with no reference to our environment, as if the other-than-human world is of no relevance to our trauma and healing, as if human development takes place in some kind of vacuum. How can this be? We are all born into land and we have relationships with animals, plants, elements and place which are, like human relationships, carried through the generations.

While C.G. Jung is one of the few psychotherapists to write extensively about our human relationship with the rest of nature (Sabini, M. 2002) there are, in my experience, few in the Jungian community who have continued this exploration in theory or practice (See e.g. Baring, A. & Cashford, J. 1991; Hillman, J. 1993; Bernstein, J. 2006; Tacey, D. 2009)

It has taken me many years to know what it means to listen to my client ***with the earth in mind*.** This might include: how to work with ecological issues that clients bring to sessions (Rust, M.J. 2008); the links between ecological health and mental health (Roszak et al 1996); exploring human development in relation to the other-than-human world (Louv, R. 2005); taking psychotherapy outdoors (see Grut, J. & Linden, S. 2002; Totton, N. 2011; Jordan, M 2014; Siddons Heginworth, I. 2011); groupwork in the community to facilitate dialogue about the ecological and social crisis (Macy, J. 1998; Seed et al 1988).

This work is about healing the split relationship with Nature, which is echoed in the two cultural narratives I have been describing. Underlying these two narratives is a fear of nature (biophobia) and a love of nature (biophilia). Nature is both idealised and denigrated, along with those peoples who have become associated with nature (eg women, black Africans and indigenous peoples). How do we hold the tension between ‘defending against/fear of’ and ‘opening out towards’ the other?

In this light the old cultural narrative becomes an exaggerated form of defence. However, our societal structures have been built on this defence. Capitalism relies on seeing the rest of nature as a collection of objects to be used. Becoming ‘part of the greater whole’ is allied with communism, feared as part of social control, associated (consciously or unconsciously) with, for example, the Nazi party. It is at these deeper levels that we find the greatest resistance to moving into a greener world. However, if humans refuse to make this shift it seems that Nature is on course for a revolution that cannot be resisted.

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