

# Ecolimia Nervosa?

## Eating Problems and Ecopsychology

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*We are golden, we are stardust  
 We are billion year old carbon  
 And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden.*  
 Joni Mitchell.

**Ecopsychology:** ECOS (home, habitat); PSYCHE (soul); LOGOS (knowing)  
**Bulimia nervosa:** BOUS (ox); LIMOS (hunger) NERVOSA (emotional)

Living within our consumer culture is like inhabiting one giant eating problem. People in some parts of the world starve, while we humans in industrial growth society consume the earth with voracious appetites at an ever increasing speed. We have become the 'king of the jungle', the top predator, who eats others but who is never eaten. We live with the illusion that we are superior to, and separate from, the web of life on which we depend. If we do not limit ourselves, the earth will.

Eating problems are just one symptom amongst many which reveal how out of balance we have become with ourselves, with our bodies, with the rest of life.

Therapy and counselling have grown up within a Western worldview that separates self from body, soul and land. This disconnection makes me feel like I'm a therapist on the Titanic. We do some great work restoring our relationship with ourselves and other humans, of reconnecting with our personal origins, all of which can be truly liberating in many ways - but how often do we mention that the ship is in crisis? Our environmental

crisis has become separated off from personal pain and our internal worlds.

Ecopsychology traces the roots of our distress to our imagined separation from the rest of nature, and the planetary crisis that has resulted from that. For how can we be truly healthy if we take care of ourselves and other humans, but still continue to damage the earth? And if that damage continues, will it not shape the psyches of future generations, just as we have been shaped by an ailing world?

How does Ecopsychology work in practice? It is an attempt to reconnect self and body, soul and land. Some therapists work outdoors taking groups in the wilds, while others practice therapy on allotments. This brings our human relationship with our whole environment into sharp focus. But since most therapists work with people in rooms in an urban setting, I want to explore here what ecopsychology might look like in this more traditional setting.

So I begin with a story, brought to me by a client called Annie<sup>1</sup>, from the film “Madagascar”:

*‘A zebra is running free in the wilds of Africa – but this is actually the dream of a zebra who has always lived in the zoo in New York. He goes and finds the other animals, tells them his dream, and excitedly suggests a plan to escape. The others have different feelings about their life in captivity. The lion likes his life, performing each day, being given steaks to eat. He feels important and it’s easier than living in the wilds, he imagines.*

*Eventually they do all decide to escape and see what life might be like in Africa, their native land. After many adventures they are washed up on Madagascar. This is an island with no large mammals for the lion to eat. He runs in the wilds and his instinctive knowledge of hunting is awakened. To his horror, he keeps seeing his friends as pieces of steak. He finds himself waking in the night with his mouth around the zebra’s bum. He is so distraught by his wish to eat his friends, that he goes off into the bush to lock himself in a cage securely away from hurting others. The zebra comes*

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of confidentiality, Annie is based on a number of bulimic women I have worked with over the course of 25 years.

*to find him, and tells him not to worry – they will all help him to find a solution.'*

Tears pour down her face as she tells me, *“I feel just like that lion - I’m so hungry I could eat the whole world - then I’m just terrified of never being satisfied, just going on and on - so I lock myself away from everyone and everything.”*

I sensed this was an important ‘ecopsychological moment’ in the course of our work together which may illuminate something of the long relationship between food, our bodies, and the land.

I heard the story of an animal who became king of an urban jungle which made him feel overly important. When he returned to the wilds, he instinctively knew what he needed, despite growing up in a zoo. When he was deprived of certain bodily needs, his longing and frustration grew very great indeed, to the point where he was so frightened of his own destructiveness that he chose to remove himself from the situation.

This tale speaks about all kinds of hungers. It speaks about physical hunger: the lion needs meat, and will continue to crave what his body needs until he gets it. Likewise, when a person bans herself from eating carbohydrate or fats, or overrides her bodily hunger, her body continues to crave what it needs and she will feel driven to binge.

It also tells the story of emotional hunger, of children like Annie, who grow up without the love and care they need, who continue to yearn for that emotional nourishment, and who look for it in friends and lovers, in food and other substances, in wealth and material goods; some change their shape, size and face in the hope of attracting this longed for love. But alas what they find is so often *not* the right emotional nourishment, and this leads to tremendous frustration, murderous rage even, and the desire to devour the world.

How we explore and relate to our many different kinds of hungers, as well as how we endure the frustration of our unmet needs, especially in the face of pain from early deprivation, is such a central part of therapy. In my experience, it is often the case that women with eating problems have internalised from our culture a harsh patriarch (shaped in different ways by early experience) who does not know how to deal with pain. Annie

identifies with this patriarch, and hates her body for being needy. She uses a rod of iron to diet, to transcend those messy, painful feelings.

This is a process which is echoed throughout western culture's long history of domestication of the wild, colonisation of land and peoples, denigration of the earth, and all that we consider feminine. Just as our culture has done, Annie is trying to cope with the pain of her early trauma through domination and control. She has internalised cultural trauma, passed down through generations.

Annie's journey towards healing involves stopping and listening to all voices and attending to her internal ecosystem, a wild place so full of spontaneous life. When messages from the body have been over ridden for so many years, it may take some time before a she can decipher what is being said, to know the difference between physical and emotional hungers, and how to respond to these longings. To recover her own feminine ground means standing up to the patriarch.

While our hunger for human connection is crucial, our hungers range far beyond the human. We hunger for place, and within that we hunger for our land of origin. This is hard to trace when we have been displaced from land for centuries. We also long for elemental experience, as well as for nature as the birthplace of our species. The origin of the nature is 'natus', to be born. Edward O Wilson defined biophilia as

*“the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life”* and that *“we are human in good part because of the particular way we affiliate with other organisms. They are the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted, and they offer the challenge and freedom innately sought”* (Wilson, P139.)

Just as people with eating problems get food and mother love confused, we, in consumer society, get our hunger for the earth confused with a desire for material wealth.

Most people, including my clients, chose to take holidays in beautiful places in nature and many enjoy spending time in parks and gardens. We return to the simple pleasures of life, and come back into our bodies, into a balance, or tao, with life. As Jung says,

*“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 1967)*

Nature is a potent healer, a place for body and soul to return to source. Yet so often these experiences are hard to articulate, and are not unpacked in therapy. Just as therapy helps us to recover meaning in human relationships, therapy can also help us to recover meaning in our relationship to the wider world, to explore our attachment and loss, dependencies, sources of nourishment, and grief about what is happening to the world.

Most clients have strong feelings when major events reverberate throughout the world, such as the recent tsunami. Recently I have begun to the question, *‘What do you feel about what is happening to our planet?’* among initial questions about family, work and relationships. One client told me recently about the desecration of her precious childhood place in a forest, a trauma so vivid she has been unable to revisit this place. Another client described the future for her generation as ‘completely fucked’. All her 20-something friends thought this too, and they dealt with it by drinking and smoking dope in most of their leisure time, while holding down responsible jobs. It was a revelation for her that she could begin to unpack some of her grief and anger about the state of world, and that this in itself could lead to a different relationship with the future.

Bringing these wider relationships into therapy is complex. The first stage for me has been to find places where I can express my own strong feelings for what is happening to the planet, to make some changes in my own lifestyle, to have an experience of thinking about the issues with other therapists in an ecopsychology group. This has helped me to practice psychotherapy with ‘ecology in mind’, to find a language with which to speak to myself and others about the interconnections between self and earth. The more I do this for myself, the more I can begin to recognise how these issues emerge in sessions.

Language may be of help in the process of reconnecting self with body and land. During the 1980’s I worked at the Women’s Therapy Centre in London where we developed a language connecting psyche and soma. For example, a bulimic woman will spew out the contents of her life in a quite

a chaotic way in the sessions. She cannot easily ingest or digest the nourishment I offer, so part of my work is to chew the cud of her undigested material and give it back in a more digestible form. This language reveals that what she is doing with food and her body she is also doing in her relationships.

Could we imagine a language of the self which includes the earth, a mother-tongue? Indigenous cultures can remind us of a language of self as interwoven with body and land, community and universe. The following quotes are from a piece translated by Jeannette Armstrong, a woman from the Okanagan tribe of western Canada:

*‘ “We survive within our skin inside the rest of our vast selves....  
Okanagans teach that our flesh, blood and bones, are Earth-body; in all  
cycles in which the earth moves, so does our body.....  
Our word for body literally means ‘the land-dreaming capacity’ ”  
The Okanagan teaches that emotion or feeling is the capacity whereby  
community and land intersect in our beings and become part of us. This  
bond or link is a priority for our individual wholeness or well-being.....  
(Jeannette Armstrong 1995 P322)*

I hope that I captured something of this in writing about the story of Madagascar. It is often through dreams and stories that the unconscious can remind us of what Jung would describe as the 2 million year old self who is still present in all of us. And if we listen to this ancient part of ourselves, it will give us this language that we have forgotten, that we now hunger for.

What would happen, I wonder, if we therapists escaped from the cages of our urban zoos into the sanctuary of nature? The story of Madagascar tells us that despite growing up in the city, we recover powerful instincts when we run wild on the land.

Jung regularly worked outdoors with clients, and I am sure that many therapists quietly work in their gardens in the summer months. We enter a different realm within ourselves when we venture outdoors. It is possible that we could enter a kind of sanctuary or temenos, a sacred and enclosed *place* which can hold human relationship.

Nature is a powerful mirror, a place where things can return to their natural order over time in an organic way, echoing what is around us. On one

occasion recently a client confessed to me that new growth for her was impossible. In that second, an acorn dropped from the tree above into her lap.

With tighter regulation entering our profession, the room is seen as the only place in which therapy can safely be contained. This is a very western notion. Ecophilosopher Sigmund Kvaloy reverses our thinking about indoors and outdoors in the following quote, where he is contemplating whether to stay in and write, or go out on his skis:

*“As I know from old experience, that course (...into Nature) would enable a realm of intense happiness – the concrete, inside ‘life world’ of the human individual. The feeling springs from a view opposite to conventional thinking, where we go OUT into nature. My world-view is one in which we move “inside” when we leave the modern concrete house or the city and enter nature. The alternative is to stay “outside” without my skis, in the dry and cold realm where the typewriter belongs, communicating with other similar parts of this outside world.”*

(Sigmund Kvaloy 1995)

The extraordinariness of the therapeutic experience enables humans to find meaning again, by retelling their stories about their human relationships of origin. Ecopsychology enables humans to find a wider meaning by retelling their stories about their human origins, and exploring their hungers for connection with the other-than-human world.

If we therapists continue to work in a way that is so human centred, we run the risk of enabling people to function better in a system that is severely out of balance. If we are able to re-conceive the self as interconnected with body, soul and land, we might just be giving ourselves and clients the tools to recreate a life where self, nature and culture are reconnected, and where we can begin to live more lightly on the earth where personal and planetary healing are one.

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