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In Search of the Wild Self:

Living on the Edge in an Age of Extremes

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1) Setting the Scene: Mary-Jayne

Are we on the edge of a radical new emergence of consciousness, or are we witnessing the final years of homo sapiens? We sit between hope and despair, on the edge of radical uncertainty.

We might ask ourselves, what has brought us to this point of ecocide, unravelling the very web of life on which we depend? Freud gives us a clue here:

“The principle task of civilisation, its actual raison d’etre, is to defend us against nature.nature rises up against us, majestic, cruel and inexorable; she brings to our mind once more our weakness and helplessness, which we thought to escape through the work of civilisation” (Freud pp15-16)

Through centuries of feeling at the mercy of the darker sides of nature, it is understandable that humans have tried to dominate and control the wild. For example, Thomas Berry suggests that after the devastating loss and suffering caused by the Black Plague in Europe, people felt **betrayed** by nature. Then, he says, the task of the spiritual person was to withdraw from the natural world, which was seen as the source of contamination, of seduction.

During the course of our long and complex western history, we have invented a hierarchy of beings and peoples, those at the top seeing themselves as the most ‘civilised’ – separate from the rest of nature. Wildness is then projected onto those further down the ladder of creation, seen as brutal and savage; they need to be tamed, and used as objects and resources for those at the top. Author

Daniel Quinn sees this as **anthropocentrism** and says it is “the most dangerous idea in existence” because it necessitates mass extinction.

This climate of fear grows as western culture struggles with the impossibility of control. Wild earth, wild beings, wild psyche are regulated at every corner. And the impact of our desire to live well within our comfort zone, away from the wild, ripples out to all corners of the planet. In the arctic wilderness, some Inuit mothers carry such extraordinary loads of PCBs and mercury that their breast milk – contaminated by our lifestyles - could be classified as hazardous waste.

Microcosm reflects macrocosm. The fear of the wild lives on in our bodies. My client who comes to me, suffering from poly-cystic ovary syndrome, feels betrayed by her body. She admits that her binge-eating is a way of punishing her body for letting her down. She tells me she does not know how to listen to her wild animal body; she has no clue when she is hungry or full, or what she wants.

Our stories about who we are, as humans, and our place in the world, are falling apart. And fast. Where can we find a creation story in which wild is honoured? A good place to begin, I find, is this phrase: **‘Relax: Nothing is under control’**

Just as green appears through cracks in pavements, wildness is to be found in the crevices of our innermost beings. Psychotherapists, of all people, know that if we disrespect the wild it will surely make itself felt. Yet what of our own profession? It may have begun with radical ideas, wild thinking, the unconscious as the sea of wild inside. But has this, too, become strangled by the fears of western culture, dominated by splits between inner and outer, spiritual and political, despite our best of intentions?

Are we lured into believing that the more therapy we do, the more “in control” of our lives we will be? Are we becoming sanitised and regulated out of existence?

It is indeed a worrying state of affairs when so many of my therapy colleagues cannot see the connection between our ‘internal worlds’ and ecology. In exasperation I sometimes reply: Try holding your breath for 5 minutes.

And what an immense relief to find a whole conference of therapists, here, reuniting inner and outer. But it is a challenge, I find, to know how we work with the bigger picture in our practice. I am inspired by the role of the shaman in this.

In a remarkable book about the history of language in relation to the earth - 'Spell of the Sensuous' -David Abram describes the role of the shaman as follows:

*“Any healer who was not simultaneously attending to the intertwined relation between the human community and the larger, more-than-human field, would likely dispel an illness from one person only to have the same problem arise (perhaps in a new guise) somewhere else in the community. Hence, the traditional...medicine person functions primarily as an intermediary between human and non-human worlds, and **only secondarily as a healer**”* (Abram P8)

Perhaps our role as therapists is similar – our primary allegiance is to the greater whole – or as Jung would say, to the Self with a capital ‘S’, and only secondarily to the individual. We sit in that uncomfortable of places bearing the tension between extremes, between wild and domesticated, between what Jung calls ‘the two million year old person within’ and our modern self.

When we honour the wild “life becomes a flowering and turbulent sea voyage rather than a flat wander round a car park interspersed with moments of blind panic”. (Martin Shaw <http://schoolofmyth.com/page2/page2.html>)

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2) The power of the wild - Nick

The term 'wild' unpacks into several layers of paradox. When I started using it, I found that many people have a negative, or at least nervous, response, because for them 'wild' has connotations of 'violent', 'dangerous' - as in 'torn apart by wild animals'. Wild places are also desolate places, comfortless and uncomfortable, far from home. But wild places are also, and increasingly, attractive, at least to westerners: while only a century or so ago to seek out the wilderness was an exceptional and eccentric act, now it seems to be the wish of many hearts.

This attraction to wilderness has clearly grown in direct proportion to the domestication of the ordinary western environment. True wilderness appears to be the ultimate elsewhere, then opposite pole of existence to urban western culture. But there is a deep paradox here: what makes it wild is the *absence* of humanity. To go to the wilderness is, in some measure, to destroy it. Mount Everest today is littered with plastic and frozen human shit.

Large scale wilderness needs simply to be left alone, entirely alone. This reality seems to be very hard for us to take in; but once we accept it, I suggest that there is something deeply comforting about it. Imagine how you would be affected by the ongoing awareness that there were whole vast areas of the planet where human beings simply did not go. No exceptions. The knowledge that life in its richness and abundance was going on *without us*. In his book *The Ecology of Eden* (1997), Evan Eisenberg has suggested that one seventh of the land, on every scale, should be simply left alone. One seventh of each continent, one seventh of each nation, one seventh of each county, one seventh of each town, one seventh of each garden. Left to itself.

This is wilderness: if we can take in what this would mean, then we have a true sense of the wild, the untamed, the undomesticated. There is also something tragic about it, a tragic version of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle - that in order for the wild to exist we have to be out of it, civilised humanity excluded from the natural order of the wild, shut out of Eden, our noses pressed up against the glass of a complex and whole ecology. Certain tribal cultures can be part of a wild whole (see e.g. Eisenberg 308-11); civilised humanity has no idea how to do it. Rilke spoke of this:

Even the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world.

This is also an picture of humans *imprisoned in consciousness*, cut off from the wild vastness of unconscious life.

I suggest, though, that we make an error of over-literality in thinking that wilderness has to be physically vast and exotically elsewhere. It is true that one cannot fit a complex ecology into a small space. Conceptually, though, we can find wilderness beside the railway track – in the abandoned patch of urban land – ultimately, sprouting between the cracks of the pavement. As soon as we take our attention away, in fact, inexhaustible wilderness renews itself, reopens its endless campaign to spread over the earth. A few years ago, immediately above and beside Highgate tube station, there was an abandoned railway station with saplings sprouting out of the platforms. What Dylan Thomas called ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’ is never far away.

In his book *The Wild Places*, Robert Macfarlane travels to some of the furthest and most inaccessible spots in the British Isles in search of wilderness. Towards the end of his book, he recognises that the wild is not necessarily dramatic and exotic. Standing in a beechwood at the edge of Cambridge, he listens to the wind:

I imagined the wind moving through ... places that were separated from each other by roads and housing, fences and shopping centres, street-lights and cities, but that were joined across space at that time by their wildness in the wind. We are fallen in mostly broken pieces, I thought, but the wind can still return us to ourselves....

Wildness was here, too, a short mile south of the town in which I lived. It was set about by roads and buildings. Much of it was menaced, and some of it was dying. But at that moment the land seemed to ring by a wild light.

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

Wildness, weeds, and wet: for me that sums it up very well - the juicy, messy, sexy tangle which is the heart of wildness, both inner and outer. Nothing is under control; but can we relax into it?

Evan Eisenberg (1997) *The Ecology of Eden: Humans, Nature and Human Nature*. London: Picador.

Robert Macfarlane (2007) *The Wild Places*. London: Granta Books.

3) Wild mind - Nick

(For more on all this see Totton, 2007)

I want to speak now about an aspect of human psychology which operates in *all* cultures and societies, and which we can call ‘wild mind’, as ecologists speak of ‘wild ecosystems’: undamaged, complex systems of interaction where each part supports and is supported by the whole. I will list four properties of wild mind, each of which has powerful implications for therapy, and indeed for living.

- Wild mind is spontaneous.
- Wild mind is co-creative.
- Wild mind is self-balancing.
- Wild mind is inherent wisdom.

Wild mind’s spontaneity follows from not resisting identification with the body, and with the body as an aspect or part of the whole system. Like an ecosystem, like our physiological functions, wild mind *happens of its own accord*, as the sum product of local reality: we do not have to bring purpose or intention to bear on the situation, as if from the outside – they arise as spontaneous expressions of the situational gestalt. When I experience myself making decisions, neural imaging (Libet 1985; see also Wegner 2002) shows that I have already ‘made’ that decision fractions of a second earlier – or rather, the decision has already made itself, since ‘I’ was not involved! Some people find this very frightening, others very reassuring...

By ‘co-creation’, I refer to wild mind as expression of the situational gestalt: how the entire universe operates as it comes to bear on this local moment. Hindu tradition speaks of ‘Indra’s net’: a complex network of jewels, each reflecting all the other jewels within its facets. Co-creation is intimately bound up with self-balancing: just as, in a therapy session or a therapy group, each participant expresses a whole relational pattern of transference and countertransference; just as a local ecosystem balances itself through the giving and receiving of biochemical messages transmitted through the air and through the underground mycorrhizal network (Buhner, 2002); so wild mind is balanced in and with its whole environment, including the environment of other humans. Gregory Bateson (1973, 1979) shows that mind, like all complex systems (including mycorrhiza), operates through homeostatic loops, mechanisms for rebalancing the system whenever it goes out of equilibrium. For him, the processes which produce healing in organs, growth in organisms, development in societies, or balance in large ecosystems are *all minds* – aspects of ‘that wider knowing which is the glue holding together the starfishes and sea anemones and redwood forests and human committees’ (Bateson 1979, 3).

Humans, however, have developed a further level of abstraction from this homeostatic mentality: consciousness, which seems to privilege purpose, intention and separateness. Bateson again: ‘Purposive consciousness pulls out, from the total mind, sequences which do not have the loop structure which is characteristic of the whole systemic structure’ (Bateson 1973, 410) – sequences which appear to move from A to B, whereas if we could see around the back of the scenery we would find that they curve round to A again in a feedback spiral. However, ‘the part can never control the whole’ (ibid, 413) : the conscious mind’s impression that it is in control of the bodymind is simply an illusion, fostered by isolating these pseudo-causal sequences, and maintaining that illusion creates tremendous stress and anxiety.

Actually, *nothing* controls the bodymind: everything just happens of its own accord. Wild mind seeks constantly to communicate this reality to consciousness, as a rebalancing – through dreams, visions, slips, symptoms, psychoses and sudden enlightenment. It also expresses itself through ‘ideomotor movement’ (<http://www.barrettdorko.com>; see also Spitz 1997), the spontaneous and unconscious body expressions which accompany us through life. It can be argued that constant disciplining and discouraging of these movements in

children – ‘Stop fidgeting!’ – is responsible for a large proportion of bodily problems in adults: wild mind prevented from natural homeostatic re-balancing.

And the inherent wisdom of wild mind follows from and sums up all of these qualities. Embodiment relates directly to clear perception of the world, what Zen Buddhists call the polished mirror. I want to suggest as well that that wild mind is embodied in the constant and worldwide experience of creatures at the interface between animal and human: Bigfoot, Sasquatch, Yeti, Woodwoose are just a few of the names that have been given to these beings, inexplicable yet, in the view of many people, undeniably *there*. The anthropologist George W Gill puts it bluntly: either ‘the most complex and sophisticated hoax in the history of anthropology has continued for centuries without being exposed’ or ‘the most manlike (and largest) nonhuman primate on earth ... remains undiscovered by modern science. ... Either conclusion appears totally preposterous ... yet one ... must be true’. (Halpin and Ames, 272).

A further possibility, perhaps, is that wild mind is manifesting in these phenomena. Some of the most consistent features of these wild humans are that they are covered in hair; they live in wild places, especially forests; and they are essentially peaceable. In European accounts, any man or woman who wandered in the wilderness and ate acorns would gradually grow a thick coat of hair all over the body and turn into a wildman or wildwoman. Many wild humans appear in Celtic myth and legend; some of them became wild after bloody and traumatic battles, fleeing into the woods for years to escape the suffering of civilised life. One of these wild beings was Merlin: a true manifestation of wild mind’s wisdom! (Naddair, 1987, 136ff; Steeves, 2002)

The question, then, is whether we can face the inner and outer wildness, especially when it takes human form. It’s not easy: there is a great fear and resistance in us to relaxing and letting go of the illusion of understanding and control. One zoologist describes finding short, broad, human-like but definitely non-human footprints in the forests of Borneo. "I was uneasy when I found them, and I didn't want to follow them and find out what was at the end of the trail. I knew that no animal we know about could make those tracks. Without deliberately avoiding the area I realize I never went back to that place in the following months of my studies"

(<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/~vern/wildman.html>).

Are we prepared to follow the tracks of the Wild Human and find out what is at the end of the trail – that not only is nothing under control, but no one is *in* control either?

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4) Wild/human beings: Mary-Jayne

In her book 'Women Who Run with the Wolves', Clarissa Pinkola Estes writes:

"Wildlife and Wild Women are both endangered species. ...we are all filled with a longing for the wild....we were taught to feel shame for such a desire....But no matter where we are, the shadow that trots behind us is definitely four-footed....." (P xiii/3)

Her book is a wonderful collection of stories about the Wild Woman archetype – as she says, "Bone by bone, hair by hair, Wild Woman comes back...through story". She describes, for example, La Loba, Wolf Woman, who collects the bones of a wolf in the desert, and sings the wolf alive - just as we might sing alive the psychic remains of our own Wild Woman soul, calling back our connection to our natural cycles, our healthy appetites, celebrating the fur on our faces, the hair and flesh on our bodies.

Many of us are perhaps familiar with the pagan Horned God, son-lover of The Goddess. He is born at the winter solstice, wedded to her at Beltane, and dies at the summer solstice. He is to be found in many different cultures in the world – Pan, the Greek God of the woodlands, Dionysus, Greek God of the vine, The Green Man, and many more.

With his face growing leaves, The Green Man reminds us of the return of spring each year, a symbol of rebirth. There is a wonderful Green Man who is bursting out of a wall above a disused station near Highgate tube, where I live – a reminder that green will grow out of any crack, that imagination can burst through brick walls.

The Green Man was absorbed into early Christianity and his images live in inside many churches. Mike Harding writes, "One day in Exeter Cathedral I worked out that images of the Green Man outnumbered those of Christ by about five to one" There are 70 in Canterbury Cathedral, alongside images of the Woodwose, the hairy Wildman of the woods.

(<http://www.mikeharding.co.uk/greenman/green5.html>)

The Green Man is likened to the figure of Mercurius. The alchemists saw Mercurius as Lumen Naturae, the divine life in all nature, ever changing, yet ever the same.

Some writers on the Tarot see The Green Man as The Fool, the card which is the very beginning and end of the major arcana. The image depicts The Fool about to step off the edge of a cliff, with a dog at his heels, and a knapsack on a stick. At the beginning of the journey of life The Fool is like an innocent child, stepping off a cliff; will she fall or fly? The Fool at the end of the journey has gained true wisdom and is once again in touch with the naivety, vulnerability and innocence of the child.

As the number zero, The Fool reminds us of circles and cycles, of death and rebirth. She is the void, the primal chaos from which all things arose, the source of life. Sometimes he is depicted dressed in animal skin, barefoot, at home in the wilds of nature.

The Fool is a wild card who can pop up anywhere, surprising us, making us laugh, jolting us out of regular routines and stasis of mind. He is a pilgrim, living on the edge of community, with no attachments, wandering across borders, outside the box. The Fool is about surrender to what life offers, full of wonder, playfulness, joy and curiosity; she melts the solidity of the world.

With all our focus on rationality and linear progress, it is as if this energy has been pushed out of modern existence. What happens to the beginning and the end in our culture? How hard it is, in the age of mortgage slavery, to find time for real pilgrimage, for extended time right out of the box.

How difficult it is to sit down for long enough to bear the extremes. But when we do manage this, living between wilderness and domestication, between ancient and modern, between the urgency of our crisis and the timelessness of wisdom, and all the frustration that entails, something new breaks through. Like the Zen student who sits and sits with the koan, The Fool is who emerges when a new insight dawns; genius appears, perspective shifts, and perhaps you laugh, wondering why you hadn't seen this all along. It seems so simple!

The Fool lives outside space and time and speaks in riddles. Perhaps this figure, who stands for divine madness, is the only hope of breakthrough when structures have become so rigid - The Fool is the only person who is able to speak to King Lear in his patriarchal rigidity. Is The Fool the wilderness within?

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