

Ecopsychology: Seeking Health in an Ailing World.

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My client brings a dream. She is standing amidst lush rainforest as termites destroy the trees. Finally, she is left alone, all the forest has been consumed and its inhabitants are extinct. She tells me that her childhood environment, her personal space, was devoured by her family, and how she eats too much when she feels alone in the world. But she also admits to fears about our future, our human consumerism and the disappearance of our forests.

Over the course of time we weave a web between personal and global. She finds forests to stand in. She tells me she feels more connected to others and the world. Her eating problem seems less like an irritation to be banished or cured, and more like a messenger from a system which is ailing from global to local. She still needs to act locally to take care of herself, but her wider perspective helps us to find a context for her problems. When we conceive of our distress in this more holistic way, perhaps there is a chance for deep reconnection with the wider community. Our personal burdens become shared burdens. Meaning returns to life. For it becomes ever more apparent that what we do to ourselves we do to the earth. What we do to the earth we do to ourselves. This is Ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology is a movement which has emerged in the last two decades.

Most of its practitioners and theorists are based in the USA, with a growing movement in Australia, South Africa and the UK. A wide range of practices are evolving, including working with people inside, outside, on the land, and in the wilds, to directly experience and explore the human-nature relationship. While wilderness is hard to find in the UK, projects are growing in urban and rural situations, making use of gardens and parks.

A good example of Ecopsychology in practice is The Natural Growth Project, part of the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture in North London. They use allotments as their location for therapy sessions with asylum seekers and refugees. These people who are so very badly hurt by other humans, as well as being dislocated from their homes and country, often find it easier to connect to nature first, before daring to risk human relationships again. Tending allotments is community building, in the widest sense, and a perfect seedbed for therapeutic dialogue. Digging the soil,

composting, nurturing plants and weeding provide wonderful metaphors for nursing the human soul. (Grut 2002)

A fundamental belief of Ecopsychology is that our current dilemmas result from the Western paradigm in which we humans regard ourselves to be the dominant life form. We treat the rest of life as a resource to be used for our benefit, alienating ourselves from nature in the process.

Our attempts to dominate and control nature spread right through our systems, beyond our natural environment. We see it in the human community, where those humans who appear to be closer to nature, such as indigenous communities, women, black peoples and working classes are oppressed. We see it in our internal worlds where intuition and instinct, powers usually associated with the feminine and nature, are to be reigned in, if not burnt at the stake. We see it in the running of corporations, in political policies, and in spiritual paths offering liberation thorough transcendence of the body. In all cases there appears to be a deep fear of the wild, of being taken over by the world of the senses and instincts. There also lies an understandable wish to ensure our survival in the face of nature's destructive powers.

Psychotherapy is not immune from this prevailing paradigm. Certain kinds of psychotherapy can place more importance on the capacity to think and symbolise, over and above a bodily knowledge. This profession has grown up in urban environments and its theory and practice focusses on human-to-human relationships, as if our well-being was unaffected by the rest of life.

Ecopsychology attempts to address and shift these patterns of oppressor and oppressed, so that we can once again relate to nature as a living, breathing force. This is complex. Expanding our ways of thinking and feeling takes time. When I work as a therapist I often feel like I am in a room on the Titanic. My client and I are doing some fine work towards personal liberation, but we do not mention the sinking of the ship. Other times, I feel like I am up on deck, playing with the string quartet. We are both aware of the situation, and choosing to engage in beautiful, finely tuned work. This may not save our lives, but it seems like the only possibility in the face of such overwhelming disaster. And then there are glimpses when together we can look reality full in the eye, and see the connections between personal, familial, social, and environmental distress. These moments are profoundly meaningful for they provide a context to personal pain. Instead of feeling

that 'something is wrong with me', there is more insight into how and where pain arises in the larger system. Rather than feeling so weighed down by the darkness and impending doom, there is room for excitement about feeling that one's own healing journey is part of a collective response to an ailing world, in all its many layers. This is not to deny that some pain belongs with the individual, or with the family. Simply that when we bring the bigger picture more fully into view, the more we can make sense of self in the world.

Bereavement, for example, can become more than the grieving for a lost loved one. It includes the multitude of losses we suffer daily, from the intrusion of 'development' into our most precious and loved natural areas, to watching the decline and pollution of our childhood landscapes, to the loss we can sometimes identify with when large scale disasters happen to other communities.

In turn, nature can be a potent solace for those in grief. At one point in my practice, I had two clients who each lost their second parent at around the same time. Both were left modest sums of money and both made snap decisions to buy a small house in the wilds of nature. They each admitted that their instant purchase took them by surprise, was uncharacteristic, and came from a deep bodily knowing of what was right, with no chance for their minds to enter into debate. It became clear that their intense need to simply be in nature was of great importance in their process of grieving. For being in nature is being amidst life, it is reconnecting with the Great Being from whence we came. Is it surprising we seek Mother Nature when our personal parents have gone? One client described this as her first spiritual experience.

I have been talking about our relationship to the natural world 'out there' as a source of deep healing for humans. But we humans are part of nature. Each time we eat or breathe we can see how intimately we are connected to our surrounding ecosystem. We are animals, with instinctive natures and sensual desires. We often speak of our own 'inner nature' and the importance of being in tune with a kind of ecosystem within. But how does this kind of Ecopsychology happen in practice?

When someone comes to me with an eating problem, they are confused about what their body wants. They are caught in the trap of trying to impose dietary regimes on their body, for they no longer trust their bodily instincts.

In the fear of being ruled by their desires they have resorted to taking executive decisions with their minds, to rule OVER the body. No wonder the body rebels. Learning to cherish, respect and listen to the wisdom of our animal bodies means overturning this way of operating. I can ask, Am I hungry? If so, what do I really fancy eating? Am I full? If I am not hungry, what is my emotional hunger seeking? Such attention to listening is a discipline of a different kind to that of dieting. It is a Buddhist mindfulness, a moment to moment attention to what is happening in the present. When we develop such precise attention, we can begin to distinguish between the different and subtle bodily messages, which tell us precisely what is needed in any given moment. If we can hear, trust and respond to our bodily nature, we can be naturally led to a size and weight that decides itself, a sustainable weight.

Distinguishing between physical and emotional hungers can be a major watershed for many. For responding to the calls of emotional hunger will lead us into all kinds of territory, not just to do with family history, but beyond, into the nature of consumerism, into devouring and being devoured, our social, biological and evolutionary histories. Our emotional, or soul hunger, might tell us what we are yearning for on a more collective level, such as a yearning for community, a yearning for wilderness, a yearning for love, a yearning for home and to belong to a tribe.

Discovering our yearning, in all its nakedness, is a central part of the therapeutic process, for our yearning is the rudder of our lives. It emanates from the opening of our hearts and shows us where to go next. If we dare to follow, and we can endure the path in all its joy and pain, our compassion and wisdom grow. We extend our capacity to identify with the pain of the 'other', be they human or not.

Arne Naess, one of the founders of Deep Ecology, a closely related field to Ecopsychology, defines our capacity for identification with the ecosystem as our Ecological Identity. This increasing ability to move beyond the individual self he calls the move into the Ecological Self (Naess, 1988) . Whatever theoretical base we choose to use as an Ecopsychologist, it would need to acknowledge our interdependence with the greater whole of which we are simply a part. Since the major part of therapeutic work is, in the end, devoted towards developing our compassion for self and others, we must include our compassion for the other-than-human world in this equation. A sign of mental health then becomes our capacity to consider what is best for

the whole, in any given situation.

Ecopsychology can provide a much needed space for the deep emotions we feel in the face of global events, from guilt, to impotence, to rage, to sadness, to joy, awe and wonder. The more we can express and explore these issues, and integrate them within our search for health, the more available we are to listen to the cry of our ailing world, and the more we know the gifts that each and every one of us has to offer to the restoration of ourselves and the earth.

Grut, Jenny The Healing Fields. London: Frances Lincoln, 2002.

Naess, Arne Self Realisation: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World. in Seed, John et al Thinking Like a Mountain. Toward a Council of All Beings. New Society. 1988.